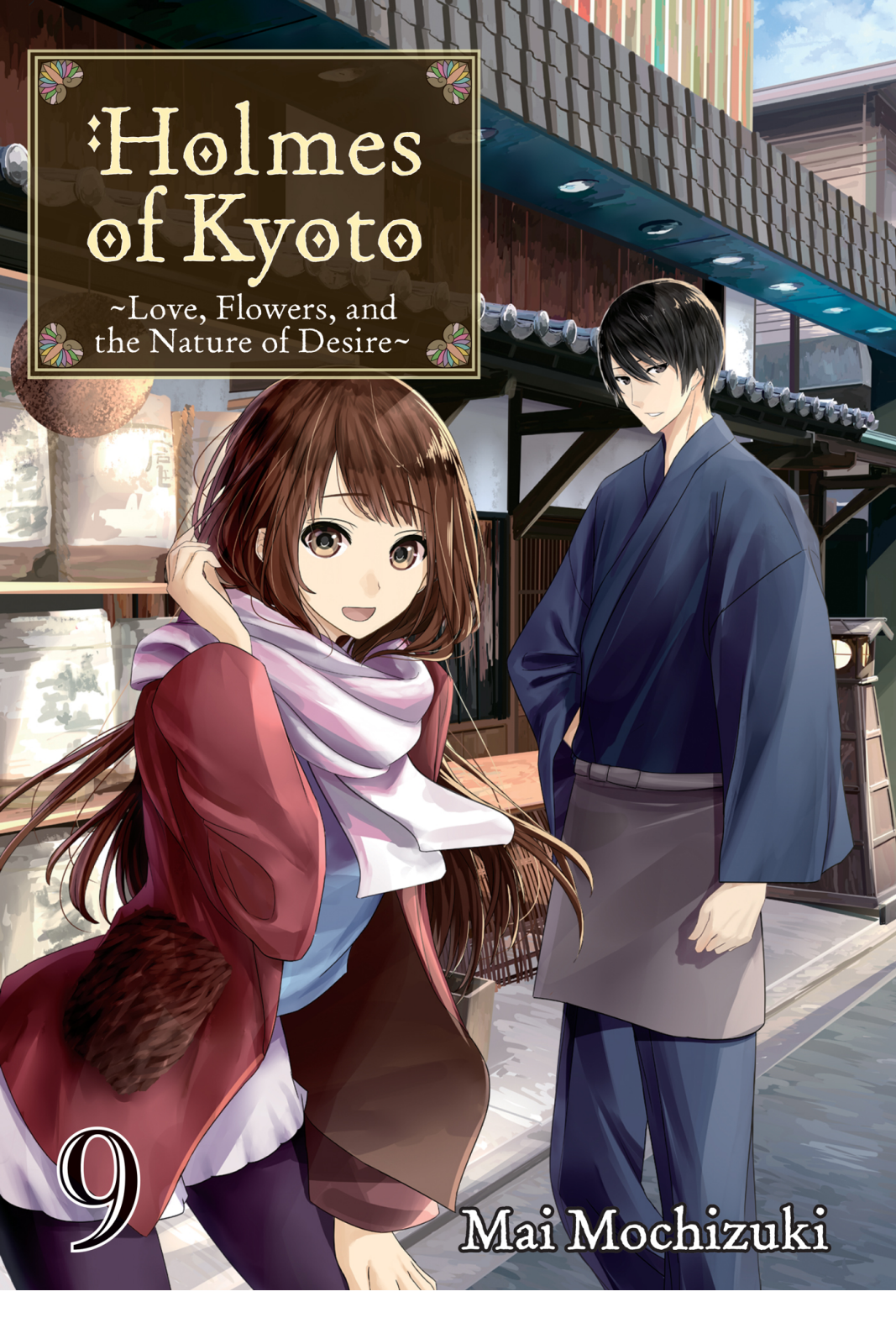




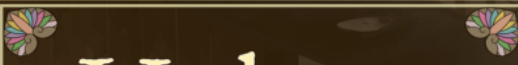
Holmes of Kyoto

~Love, Flowers, and
the Nature of Desire~

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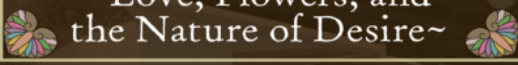
Mai Mochizuki





Holmes of Kyoto

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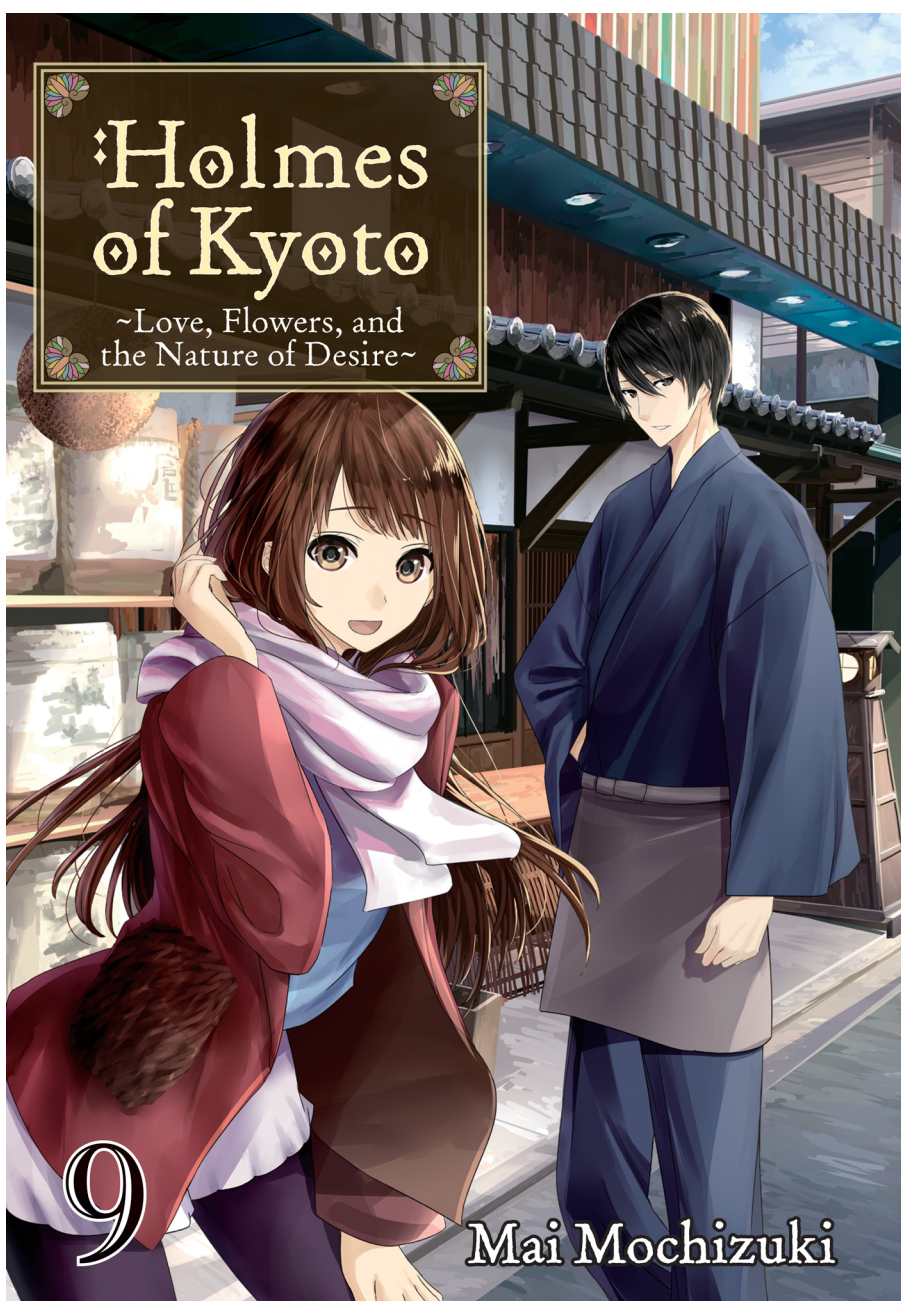
Mai Mochizuki

Holmes of Kyoto

~Love, Flowers, and
the Nature of Desire~

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Mai Mochizuki



Kiyotaka Yagashira

He is the grandson of the owner of Kura, an antique store in Kyoto's Teramachi-Sanjo district. Nicknamed "Holmes," he has an incredibly sharp mind despite his gentle demeanor. Sometimes he acts like your typical mischievous, "wicked" Kyoto boy.

Aoi Mashiro

She is a first-year university student who moved to Kyoto from Omiya, Saitama in high school. In an unexpected turn of events, she winds up working part-time at Kura and learning about art and antiques from Kiyotaka.



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Prologue

It was mid-January. The Teramachi-Sanjo shopping street was bustling as usual, but inside the small antique shop Kura, there was only quiet jazz music, the ticking of the grandfather clock, and the soft sound of me opening a book. Since I'd been given permission to peruse any of the books and materials in the store, I, Aoi Mashiro, was sitting at the counter, reading a book about art. I'd been doing this a lot as of late, whenever there wasn't any work to be done.

It had been nearly ten months since Kiyotaka "Holmes" Yagashira, who taught me about antiques, had left for training. His absence meant that I had fewer opportunities to see antiques, which brought on feelings of impatience rather than sadness. Wanting to see as much art as possible, I started visiting museums more than I used to, both in the city and around Kansai.

"This one is in the National Museum of Art in Tokyo..."

I was frustrated to learn that the art in the book was on display in the Kanto region. *Why didn't I go to this museum when I lived in Saitama?* I knew it was to be expected since I hadn't been interested in art and antiques at the time. I'd only developed this interest after working here—after meeting Holmes, the young apprentice appraiser with an exceptional eye for observation and appraisal. His sharpness had earned him the nickname "Holmes of Kyoto," and he was currently away for training to broaden his horizons.

Holmes had returned to work at Kura in December, but as soon as the New Year holidays were over, he'd left for his new placement. This one was nearby, so I didn't think I'd miss him, but he was so busy that I hadn't been able to see him at all.

"I guess there's nothing we can do," I said, lowering my eyes.

Suddenly, the door chime rang. I closed the book and looked up, but I didn't say my usual "Welcome." A well-built man wearing a kimono, hat, and scarf was standing there holding something wrapped in cloth.

"Hello, Aoi," he said, bowing and taking off his hat, revealing a familiar bald head.

Being in his presence always made me nervous.

"Ensho..." I murmured with a gulp.

"Thanks for coming on New Year's," he said, grinning and taking off his scarf.

I awkwardly shook my head. "You don't need to thank me."

After a series of events, this former counterfeiter had become the apprentice of Shigetoshi Yanagihara, a famous appraiser. At the beginning of the year, I had attended his unveiling party in Gion. It was still hard to believe that Ensho of all people was now an apprentice appraiser, just like Holmes. I felt like I was having a weird dream.

"Is Holmes in?" he asked, looking around the store.

I shook my head. "He's away for the time being."

"Oh, he's already off to the next place." He sighed, disappointed.

Ensho used to be prickly and intimidating, but he had become much softer as of late. Perhaps that was why he didn't strike fear into my heart anymore.

"You knew that Holmes was undergoing training?" I asked.

"Yeah, I heard about it at the party. Where is he now? Is it really far again?"

"No, he's in the city this time. It's a sake brewery in Fushimi."

"A sake brewery? Never would've guessed."

"I heard that the owner knows the people there."

It was a small brewery that was mainly family-run. They had started a new line of business and had requested Holmes's help.

"Oh, please have a seat," I added. "I'll make coffee." I gestured at the seats and went into the kitchenette.

"Thanks, don't mind if I do." Ensho sat down and placed the cloth-wrapped object on the counter. "Well, it's good that he's getting all that experience. He's a sheltered boy, after all. Being exposed to the harshness of the world will do him good."

I chuckled in the kitchenette. "I don't think the world is very harsh to him, though." I finished preparing the coffee and served it to Ensho.

"No matter where he goes, everyone ends up deferring to him 'cause he does everything perfectly, eh? Figures," the man murmured cynically as he sipped the coffee, immediately realizing what I was getting at. That perceptiveness of his was similar to Holmes's, even if their appearances and auras were completely different.

"Do you need Holmes for something?" I asked.

"I don't *need* him. I just wanted him to take a look at something I bought at a flea market earlier."

In other words, something had caught his eye among the many miscellaneous antiques, and he'd come here to have his hunch confirmed. I found myself curious as to what it was.

"Um, would you mind showing it to me?"

"Right, you're a high school girl appraiser."

"I'm not in high school anymore, and I'm only an apprentice of an

apprentice.”

I had begun university last April, and almost a year had passed since then. Even though others told me that I'd become more mature, apparently, Ensho still thought I was a high school girl. I couldn't help but be disappointed.

“Oh, so you're in university now. Kids grow up so darn fast.”

“I'm not a kid.”

“Sure, but you haven't changed at your core. How can that guy be such a wuss when it comes to you?” He rested his chin in his hand, seeming slightly amused.

“What?!”

My cheeks burned at the fact that he could see through our relationship. I wanted to object angrily, but if I said the wrong thing, he'd surely make my life even harder.

“Or maybe there's another reason... Yeah, it has to be that,” he said to himself.

I tilted my head. “Another reason?”

“It's nothing. Aren't you frustrated that Holmes won't do anything to you?”

“No!”

Suddenly, I recalled something that had happened a few days before Holmes had left for his next work placement. The two of us had been alone in the store that day, and I had been helping him prepare the tax return.

* * *

“Holmes, I sorted out the receipts by month,” I said, placing a stack of clear folders on the counter.

It was the first day of work after the New Year.

“Thank you. My father really doesn't know how to handle these things, so it turned into a mess while I was gone. I expected it, though,” Holmes said, sighing as he looked at the computer screen.

The receipts had been neatly organized up until March, when Holmes had still been managing the store. Everything after that, though, had just been tossed into a box—which looked more like a recycling bin at this point. It was a sad state of affairs.

“But he's an author, so he has to do his own tax return, doesn't he?”

“I do that for him too. I'm basically his secretary.”

“You really can do everything, huh?”

“This kind of work is tedious but not difficult. Some people are more suited to it than others, and I don't mind it.”

“More suited to it...” I looked down at the account book and grimaced as soon as I saw all the numbers.

Maybe I'm not suited for this.

Naturally, all of the receipts were from the previous year.

"A year goes by fast, huh?" I muttered.

He made a pained face. "Last year was one full of regrets."

That came as a surprise. Holmes had begun his training last year.

At the beginning of spring, he'd worked as a curator at Shokado Garden Art Museum in Yawata City, and after that, as Ueda's secretary in Umeda. From fall until winter, he'd been an assistant in New York, at one of the most influential museums in the world of art. In my eyes, it looked like he had been actively working and enjoying himself at all of those jobs. Was I mistaken?

"Working at Shokado Garden Art Museum and being Ueda and Hopkins's secretary were all amazing experiences, and I enjoyed my time there. What I regret is my personal life."

"Huh?" I tilted my head.

"First of all, there was your nineteenth birthday. I was working, so I was only able to have dinner with you."

Right, Holmes had been working at the museum at the time. My birthday was in the middle of Golden Week, which is a profitable time of year for museums. Since he couldn't take the day off, he'd rushed over from Yawata City after work to have dinner with me. The restaurant was Fortune Garden Kyoto on the north side of city hall. It was a five-minute walk from Teramachi-Sanjo, making it so that I could go there right after work. It had a modern stone exterior designed by Goichi Takeda, who was known for his work on the city hall's architecture, and the interior was sophisticated.

"But I was really happy," I insisted. "Even though you were busy, you made time to celebrate my birthday at a fancy restaurant."

I had told him that I didn't want an expensive present, so he'd given me a type of casual kimono called a tsumugi. It had a cute design—light yellow with brightly colored small flowers—and he had smiled and said, "Since you've gotten used to wearing kimono, I'd like you to wear them more often. This is for everyday use." I had been so moved by the unexpected gift that I had barely been able to form words.

As I was fondly remembering my last birthday, Holmes grumbled, "And I regret not being able to go to your school festival."

"You mean the Nakaragi Festival?" I asked, clapping my hands together. It was a school festival held in November at Kyoto Prefectural University. Since I wasn't in any clubs myself, I had ended up helping Kaori at the flower arrangement club. Holmes had been in New York at the time, so I had told him about the festival over a video call. Even though it hadn't been long ago, it already made me nostalgic.

“I was too busy last year, even by training standards. I can’t believe I couldn’t make time for the things that mattered most.”

“It’s not your fault.”

From my perspective, Holmes had always been busy working, even before his training began. As a university student, he had helped with the shop and supported the manager and owner on top of his studies. It seemed like a large workload. That said, he had done everything at his own pace. It must have been easy for him to secure time for himself. So going out into the world and working at the pace of others may have been harder for him than it looked.

“Anyway, I arranged my schedule for this year so that I won’t have any regrets,” he said, folding his arms.

He suddenly fell silent. *Did he remember something, or is he pondering something in particular?* The abrupt silence puzzled me, but I ignored it and gathered the documents on the counter.

After some time, Holmes spoke again. “Um...”

“Yes?” I looked up.

“I’m arranging it so that I can take Golden Week off this year.”

“Golden Week?”

“This coming May 3rd is your twentieth birthday, which we ought to celebrate.”

“Oh, right.” I nodded shyly. “I can’t believe I’m already turning twenty. Time goes by so fast...”

“It felt long to me. I’ve been waiting impatiently for that day.”

“Really?!”

I didn’t know he was looking forward to my coming-of-age so much. Was he that eager to be able to drink alcohol with me?

“If it’s all right with you,”—he breathed in—“would you like to go on a trip together?” His cheeks were slightly red.

My heart skipped a beat. “Huh?”

Go on a trip together...

I understood what that meant. From the day our relationship began until now, so many things had happened that it all felt like a blur. But the only thing that had progressed was time. Our relationship had remained stagnant. I wasn’t particularly dissatisfied, but I did wonder if it was about time for us to move to the next stage. And now that time had come—the time to progress beyond holding hands and kissing...

He was thoughtful enough to make it my twentieth birthday, I thought, embarrassed and strangely impressed.

“Yes,” I said softly, my heart pounding.

He let out a long sigh and flopped onto the counter.

“Holmes?!”

“Oh, thank goodness. I didn’t know what I’d do if you said no,” he

said, his forehead still planted on the hard surface.

“Holmes...”

“Sorry, even though I’m a grown man, I’m always like this.”

“No, it’s okay.”

Despite my nervousness, I couldn’t help but relax into a grin when I saw that his ears were flushed red.

“I’m going to live my life in anticipation of that day.” He lifted his head and smiled happily.

“What?!” I looked down in embarrassment, holding my hands against my burning cheeks.

* * *

“It’s not something to blush *that* hard over,” Ensho said with a shrug, as if convinced that I really was still a child.

“I’m not blushing...” I averted my gaze, afraid that he’d read my mind if we made eye contact. “So, what did you buy at the flea market?”

“Oh, yeah.”

He reached for the object and unwrapped it while I took my appraisal gloves out of my apron pocket and put them on. Unlike Holmes, his hands were rough, but his careful motions reminded me of Holmes’s nonetheless. Holmes’s appearance and mannerisms matched perfectly, however, while Ensho’s didn’t. They really were like two sides of the same coin.

Inside the cloth wrapping was a wooden box from which he took a tea bowl. It was Bizen ware with a round, simple form, reddish-brown with some other blotches.

“Don’t you think it’s nice? I bought it for five thousand yen,” he said with a confident grin.

I continued to stare at the tea bowl. “Sorry, do you mind if I touch it?” I took off my gloves without waiting for an answer.

“I learned about that from Yanagihara,” he commented. “When appraising ceramics, you’re supposed to take off your gloves, yeah?”

“Yes, but some people don’t like the idea of their art being touched directly, so we usually wear non-slip gloves when examining them.”

“You take them off for ‘serious’ appraisals, don’t you? So that’s why Holmes took his gloves off that time...” he murmured nostalgically.

Back when Ensho had brought his white porcelain incense container here, Holmes had taken off his gloves. Now, I too took off my gloves and wrapped my hands around the tea bowl. I had touched one by the same potter before.

“It really is nice,” I said, looking down at the tea bowl. “I think it’s

the work of Yu Fujiwara.”

“Yu Fujiwara...”

“Yes. The white round marks in the inner view are ‘botamochi.’” The pattern was named that because it resembled marks left behind by small rice cakes. “The faint yellow sesame seed marks on the exterior and the ‘Bizen red’ color that comes from high-temperature firing are beautiful too, and above all, the shape and form make me think that it’s authentic.”

“What’s ‘the inner view’?”

“Oh, I’m referring to the bottom of the tea bowl. It’s called ‘the inner view’ because you look into the tea bowl to see it.”

Did Yanagihara not teach him this?

“Yanagihara’s just using me as an errand boy while telling me to ‘look at the real thing.’ He hasn’t taught me that kind of knowledge yet,” Ensho said, reading my mind. He looked away, seeming slightly unhappy. “If only he’d teach me everything in detail like your teacher does,” he remarked with a bit of a sneer.

“Holmes’s lectures are detailed, but I learned about things like ‘the inner view’ from books. Rather than being taught everything, I also do my own research.”

I often heard unfamiliar words when listening to Holmes and the owner’s conversations. At first, I asked them what everything meant, but now I looked up the words on my own.

“You’re a hard worker, eh?”

“No, it’s not that. I do it because I enjoy it.”

Sometimes people imply that I’m a great person, and it makes me feel bad. It’s the same conflicted feeling I got when I was making sweets solely because I wanted to eat them, and my mother praised me for putting so much effort into it. I had put a lot of effort into it but only because I was absorbed in making what I wanted to eat.

“I guess that’s how it is for people who really like this stuff,” Ensho murmured in a mildly ashamed tone. Then he looked at me and asked, “Who’s Yu Fujiwara, anyway? Someone famous?”

“Yes,” I said, taking a reference book from the shelf and opening it. “He was a potter active from the Showa period until recently, and he was designated a living national treasure. His father, Kei Fujiwara, was a living national treasure too.”

“He’s got pedigree, eh? There seem to be a lot of people like that in the antiques world, like Holmes.” He sighed with a fed-up look on his face.

Like he said, the world of antiques was very traditional. Craftsmanship and appraising often ran in the family. As Yanagihara’s apprentice, Ensho was probably tired of encountering such customs. It also seemed like he felt inferior because of it.

I looked up at him and said, "But I don't think that people with pedigrees have it easy either."

"What?" He shot me a glance.

"The owner's son couldn't follow in his footsteps, after all. Holmes studied hard under his brilliant grandfather to refine his perception, but even though he became a great appraiser at such a young age, he's still treated as an apprentice. No matter how hard he works, people assume he's only skilled because he's Seiji Yagashira's grandson. I think that if you reached Holmes's level as an appraiser, everyone would openly praise your talent. It would've been the same for Yu Fujiwara."

I looked down at the tea bowl.

"Yu Fujiwara was completely blind in his left eye, and his right eye couldn't see very well either. He had a huge handicap, but he turned it into a strength, creating his works with his 'mind's eye' and becoming a living national treasure. You chalked it up to pedigree, but it's actually incredible for a parent and child to both be selected as living national treasures. On the other hand, there are also people who are only ever acknowledged for their pedigrees and nothing else. Thinking about it that way, it's pretty sad for them."

"I guess."

"By the way, Yu Fujiwara was actually famous for his jars, to the point where he was called 'the man of jars.'" I flipped to the next page in the reference book and showed Ensho a picture of one of Yu Fujiwara's jars. It was large and bulky with a bit of a bold aura, yet its form was beautiful.

"Huh, that's a nice jar."

"Right? Apparently, he also went abroad to promote Bizen ware."

"Is that why he was recognized as a national treasure?"

"Maybe. I think it was the result of using his weakness as a strength and continuing to do what he truly loved. I can feel that passion in his work, and it really is great. That said, I can't believe that this was being sold at a flea market. You said you got it for five thousand yen? If you get it properly appraised, I think you can add two zeros onto that." I looked down at the tea bowl and giggled. Noticing Ensho's stare, I hurriedly shook my head and said, "Oh, but I'm only an amateur. You should get Yanagihara to look at it." I facepalmed, realizing that I'd said all of that without considering that the tea bowl could be a fake.

"You're similar to Holmes, you know that?"

"Huh? I am?" I blinked.

"Yeah, you're just like him." He laughed. "I'll ask Yanagihara to look at it, but you're probably right. Yu Fujiwara... I like him. He's a good potter."

“I’m glad,” I said with a smile.

Ensho put the tea bowl back into the box and wrapped the cloth around it, seeming satisfied. “Which means the same goes for you.”

“Huh?”

“You’re like dried squid too.” He stood up and put his hat and scarf on. “All right, thanks for the appraisal and the coffee.” He waved goodbye and left the store, not looking back.

“I’m like dried squid?” I pointed at myself and stared blankly at his receding figure as I listened to the echoes of the door chime.

Chapter 1: Flowers, Sake, and Rivalry in Love

1

If you go west on Kitaoji Street and turn north onto Shimogamo Center Street, you'll immediately see my school, Kyoto Prefectural University. With the Kyoto Concert Hall, the Kyoto Botanical Gardens, the Kyoto Prefectural Library and Archives, and Kitayama Street nearby, I'm proud to say that it's a wonderful environment surrounded by art and greenery.

However, it was now late January. The trees on campus and along the streets were barren, and there was no lush environment to be seen.

As I walked down the hallway after class, I noticed that a window was open and found myself looking outside. A cold wind brushed my cheeks. I shivered and closed the window. It would continue to be this cold for another month and a half. This was my fourth winter in Kyoto, but I still couldn't get used to it. The cold was unbearable, but at the same time, I quite liked winter fashion. When I was in high school, I could only protect myself with a cardigan under my blazer and a scarf, but now that I was in university, I could enjoy dressing up. I was wearing a scarf and mid-length coat over a knit top, shorts, colored tights, and short boots. Thanks to this, most of my part-time job earnings went to clothes and paying my parents for my phone bill.

I need to learn how to mix and match clothes so that I can save money for my trip with Holmes. I also need to lose some weight...

"Would you like to go on a trip together?"

His words replayed in my mind. I suddenly felt embarrassed and looked down. My cheeks were burning. They were probably as red as a boiled octopus.

No, apparently, I'm a dried squid, not an octopus...

I frowned as I recalled what Ensho had said. I knew that "dried squid" was supposed to be considered a compliment. It meant something that grew on you over time.

But why don't I feel happy about it? Is it because Ensho said it? No, I'd feel the same way if it had been Holmes. If Holmes said to me, "Aoi, you're like dried squid," I wouldn't be happy. My response would probably be something like, "Holmes, could you use a different expression?"

"Aoi? You're Aoi, right?" came an unfamiliar voice from behind

me.

Confused, I turned around and saw a stylish, nice-seeming young man running up to me.

"Oh, I knew it was you, Aoi. I was surprised by how mature you've become. It's been a while." He gave me a friendly smile.

"Oh." I did recognize his face but that was all.

"I had no idea you went to our school. Did you come here because of Holmes?"

Apparently he knows Holmes too. Who is this?

I put on a vague smile as I scoured my memory.

"I heard that you're going out with him now."

He even knows that?!

I gave him a good look again. While his face looked familiar, I just couldn't remember who he was. *Is he someone I met at one of the Yagashira family's parties? Or Yanagihara's?*

"Oh yeah, sorry that my brother's always getting help from you guys," he continued.

"Your brother?" I squeaked.

"Man, I never thought he'd get so famous. Maybe it's because he became friends with Holmes. It seems like he's getting a lot of advice from him."

A famous brother who gets advice from Holmes...

I put a hand over my mouth, the dots finally connecting.

"You're...Haruhiko, right?"

"Oh, did you just realize that now? Yeah, it's me, Haruhiko Kajiwara."

"I'm so sorry."

This was Akihito Kajiwara's younger brother, Haruhiko. He was the youngest of three brothers, and I had met him at the mountain lodge in Kurama. Back then, he had mentioned that he was attending Kyoto Prefectural University.

But shouldn't he have graduated by now?

"I'm in grad school," he said, seeming to have guessed what I was thinking. "I wanted to move up to Kyoto U like Holmes did, but I wasn't good enough." He gave an awkward laugh.

"Don't be so hard on yourself."

I had worked really hard to get into this school. I thought it was amazing that he could advance to grad school here.

Was he always such an attractive guy? I remember having a positive impression of him, but I also thought he was really plain. Maybe he felt inferior in the presence of Holmes and Akihito, who were exceptionally good-looking.

"Um, how is everyone doing?" I asked, thinking about their beautiful mother, the Kajiwara family secretary, Kurashina, and his

oldest brother, Fuyuki.

“Everyone’s doing well, especially Akihito.”

“I’m sure he is.”

Akihito had been acting in a TV drama since last fall. It wasn’t the kind that aired at 9 or 10 p.m., or even at noon. It was one of those prime-time “ranger” shows that aired in 30-minute episodes at 6:30 p.m. It was so successful that a second season had been announced for this year.

As we were talking, my best friend, Kaori Miyashita, approached us, calling out, “Aoi!”

“Sorry for keeping you,” Haruhiko said, taking the hint. “I’m glad I got to meet you again. I’ll see you around.” He raised a hand and walked off.

“Oh, sure. Please give everyone my regards.” I bowed to him and turned to Kaori.

“Great, you didn’t leave yet,” Kaori said, gasping for breath and placing her hands on my shoulders. It seemed like she had run over in a hurry.

“Yeah, although I’m about to. Do you need me for something?”

“Uh-huh, but first, who was that? He’s pretty hot.” She looked at Haruhiko’s back as he walked away, her eyes sparkling.

“That’s Akihito’s younger brother.”

“No way! Akihito’s brother goes to our school?”

“Yeah, he said that he’s a grad student here. I honestly forgot that Akihito had a younger brother who went to KPU.” I laughed.

“He’s not the same type as Akihito, but he’s a good-looking guy, as you’d expect.”

“So, what did you need me for?”

“Oh right, do you have work today?”

“Yeah, but it’s okay if I’m a little late.”

Now that I’m in university, the manager has been very considerate of me. He said, “I want you to focus on your university life, so feel free to prioritize university events and spending time with your friends.”

“Great. So my club is going to be having an event...”

“Oh?”

“We still need to hash out the details, but the seniors were asking if we could get you again since you were such a great help during the Nakaragi Festival.”

“I didn’t do that much,” I said, shaking my head.

At KPU’s school festival last fall, I had helped out the Western-style flower arrangement club that Kaori belonged to. They had opened a Flower and Tea Shop, where the idea was to arrange plants to create a natural indoor space and serve various kinds of tea and scones. It was a lot of fun, and now the club was going to hold

another event.

“They said if you’re busy with your part-time job, you can just help on the day before and the day of the event.”

“I think that’ll be okay. I really liked helping out during the festival, so I definitely want to join in again.”

“Great, I’m sure they’ll be excited,” Kaori said, smiling.

Kaori and I headed straight to the classroom the club used for its activities, since I was going to participate in their first meeting to plan the event.

“Sorry we’re almost late,” said Kaori after opening the sliding door.

The club members turned around and greeted us with smiles on their faces.

“It’s okay; we just got here too.”

“Hello again, Mashiro.”

“Thanks for inviting me back,” I said, bowing. “I look forward to working with you.”

“Same here.”

“We really appreciate your help. Do you have work today?”

“Oh, I took the day off.” I had texted the manager earlier, and he’d given me the day off without a fuss.

The club consisted of five members including Kaori. They were all women, and the atmosphere was as peaceful as ever. I thought back to two months ago when Kaori had introduced me to them...

* * *

“Let me introduce you to the other members, Aoi. This is our president, Okubo. She’s a third-year,” Kaori said, starting with a woman whose hair was tied up in a ponytail.

“I’m Ikumi Okubo. I went to a private girls’ school in Kanto. I came here because I admired Kyoto and co-ed schools, but before I knew it, I had become the president of an all-girls club.” Okubo spoke in a crisp tone of voice and had a bright smile. She seemed really cheerful, which was perfect for someone in her position.

The woman next to Okubo didn’t wait for Kaori’s introduction before saying, “I’m Akari Meguro. I went to the same high school as Okubo, and I’m a third-year too. I’m basically the vice president.” She had long hair and spoke gently, giving off the vibe of a proper lady. She seemed kind and carefree.

“I’m Seiko Osaki, a second-year. I came from a private school in south Kyoto,” added a woman with a short bob cut.

A private school in south Kyoto? I wonder if it’s the same one Holmes went to, I thought as I bowed and said, “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Keiko Shibuya,” said the last one, a slightly plump woman with wavy hair. “I’m a second-year and I came from Oki High.”

“Oh, I’m from Oki High too,” I said without thinking, placing a hand on my chest and stepping forward.

“I know.” She chuckled. “You said you went to high school with Miyashita. Nice to meet you.”

“Yes!”

They all seemed like nice people, which was a relief.

* * *

Okubo clapped her hands, bringing me back to the present. “Okay, have a seat, everyone. Let’s start the meeting.”

“Okay!” everyone shouted excitedly, taking their seats at the table. The exception was the vice president, Meguro, who stood next to Okubo.

I looked around at the club members. Okubo and Meguro were third-years, Osaki and Shibuya were second-years, and Kaori was the only first-year. Kaori had joined the club by herself because she liked flower arrangement, not caring that she didn’t know any of the others beforehand. I really admired that about her.

“On the day of Setsubun, a festival is held in the Demachiyanagi shopping street, officially known as the Demachi Masugata shopping street. We’re going to rent a section of the shop space and hold an exhibit. Since the Flower and Tea Shop at the Nakaragi Festival was a huge success, I think we should do another flower cafe. Does anyone have any ideas?” Okubo wrote “Demachi Masugata Shopping Street Festival Event” on the whiteboard and turned to look at us, her ponytail gently swaying. She was such an energetic person.

Kaori raised her hand and said hesitantly, “Um, if we’re going to open a cafe at an event like that, I think we might have to get an actual business permit for handling food. It’s not like the school festival...”

“It’s okay,” replied Okubo. “The place that’s renting to us is a cafe, so if we want to do that, they’ll supervise us. But they said it’s fine if we only want to do an exhibit without the cafe part.”

Everyone smiled in relief.

“So we’re free to plan any kind of event we want. Ideas?”

“Hmm.” Meguro pressed her finger to her cheek and looked up. “I don’t want to do the same thing as last time. There were areas for improvement then too.”

“Areas for improvement?” I tilted my head. The event had seemed fun and successful to me. *Was there anything that could’ve been done better?*

Kaori shrugged and said, “It was successful as a cafe, but people

didn't really look at the flower arrangements."

"Oh, now that you mention it..." The customers had enjoyed the interior in general, but they hadn't taken the time to look at each individual work.

Osaki sharply raised her hand and said, "In that case, how about we drop the cafe and just do an exhibit?"

Shibuya hummed. "I don't think we'd get any visitors if we did that."

Everyone nodded in agreement. I frowned as I jotted down their opinions.

Food shop or exhibit

We want people to look at the flower arrangements this time

People might not come if it's only an exhibit

"Yeah, there's no point if no one comes," replied Kaori.

"If only there was a way to hold a cafe and still have people interested in the flowers," Shibuya mused.

"This is tough," I murmured.

How can we get people interested in the flower arrangements?

We continued to discuss it for a while, but since we couldn't formulate a good plan, we decided that we would each come up with our own ideas before the next meeting and go from there.

2

If you take the Keihan Main Line to Chushojima Station or Fushimi-Momoyama Station and walk a little, you'll come across Fushimi, a ward in Kyoto known for its sake. When most tourists hear "Fushimi," they probably think of Fushimi Inari Shrine, but I'd like them to see the traditional atmosphere of the sake breweries too.

Fushimi has long been called Kyoto's southern gate. In the Heian period, it was a scenic place where imperial and noble families had their second homes, and in the Azuchi-Momoyama period, Hideyoshi Toyotomi built Fushimi Castle and formed a large town around it. In the Edo period, Fushimi prospered as a gateway to the Yodo River, which facilitated water transport between Kyoto and Osaka, and in the Bakumatsu period, it set the stage for a new era of loyalist samurai, including Ryoma Sakamoto.

"It really is a dramatic place, now that I think about it," Kiyotaka mused as he gazed at the streets of the brewery town. He was wearing dark-blue work clothes and a waist apron, sweeping the ground in front of the establishment.

The sun set early in January, so the western sky was already turning orange. The rows of old sake breweries had their lights on, making the scene even more picturesque at this time of day.

Fushimi had long been home to world-famous breweries such as Gekkeikan and Kizakura, but Kiyotaka was currently living at a very small one.

A woman opened the brewery's sliding door from inside. She was wearing a happi coat that said "Kotani Brewery" on it. She was twenty-five, but perhaps because she was so short, she looked younger than that.

"Thank you for your hard work, Yagashira."

"You too, Mizuki." Kiyotaka stopped sweeping and gave her a smile. "I've finished the preparations."

He turned around and looked up at the small shop next to the sake store. The sign said "Bar Konta," and it had two foxes facing left and right.

Kotani Brewery had been a small brewery and liquor store for quite some time, and in the summer before last, they had renovated the neighboring warehouse into a bar. When it opened, they distributed free drink coupons and had moderate success, but after half a year, customer traffic had begun to slow down. They had been afraid that the business would continue to decline, so when the overseer had heard that Kura's owner was looking for training locations for Kiyotaka, he had put in his request for a month at the beginning of the year, and Kiyotaka had accepted.

The manager of a sake brewery is called a "kuramoto" or "overseer," rather than the modern term "owner." Mizuki Kotani was the overseer's daughter and an employee of the brewery.

She peeked into the bar and let out a goofy squeal, looking at the tables and floor, which had been polished to a shine.

"They're sparkling," she murmured. Then she shifted her gaze to the single-flower vase on the counter. "Oh, where did that camellia come from?"

"I added it. There was a lovely old Bizen vase in the overseer's collection, so I borrowed it."

"It is lovely. That collection isn't dad's; it was my late grandpa's. He liked antiques, which is why he was a regular customer at Kura."

"Yes, so I heard."

Mizuki's late grandfather, Takahiro, was a friend of Kiyotaka's grandfather, Seiji Yagashira, and one of Kura's customers. After his death, their families had continued to keep in touch. The new overseer, Takao, looked up to Seiji as a father figure and asked him for advice on various things.

"I never thought one of our unused treasures could shine like this." Mizuki folded her arms and stared admiringly at the vase.

The bar interior consisted of a counter and four small tables. It looked small, but it could fit twenty people. The name "Konta" was a

play on “Kotani” and “kon kon,” the sound made by foxes. Foxes were a symbol of Inari shrines such as Fushimi Inari, and to match the name, the bar’s coasters and chopstick holders had cute fox designs.

“These are really cute,” Kiyotaka said, picking up a chopstick holder and smiling. “Are they handmade?”

“Yep, I made them.”

“You did?” He looked at Mizuki, impressed.

“I like handicrafts, and the interior design was my idea too. My brother’s a top-notch craftsman but he doesn’t know anything about this stuff.”

Mizuki’s older brother entered the bar through the back door as they were talking. He came out to the storefront, surprised that the kitchen sink was so polished he could see his face in it.

“Hello, Kota,” Kiyotaka greeted him, bowing.

Kota was the brewery’s “sanyaku.” Sake breweries had several positions, headed by the overseer. At Kotani, there were the following:

Toji: the chief sake brewer. Here, the overseer (kuramoto) was also the toji.

Sanyaku: a middle-management position under the toji. Kota filled this role.

Kurodo: workers who followed the direction of the toji and sanyaku.

Meshitaki: young apprentices who took care of miscellaneous chores such as cleaning and cooking.

Kotani Brewery had two kurodo working under Kota.

“Thanks for cleaning up,” he said succinctly with a light bow. The man was almost thirty. He was very tall and wore a white hand towel around his head. He seemed blunt and unfriendly at first—the type of person who was often misunderstood—but Kiyotaka perceived him as a nice person who was simply socially awkward.

“I’m just doing my job,” Kiyotaka answered, having mainly been doing odd jobs during his stay.

“Sorry about this. I can’t believe we’re making the Yagashira family’s son do chores at our tiny brewery.”

“Yeah, you’re the prince of the antique community,” added Mizuki. “You deserve better than this.”

Kiyotaka held up a hand and shrugged. “I’m really not that important.”

“And the rumors were right that you’re a competent worker,” she continued. “You’re like the embodiment of the idea that even chores can become impressive work when they’re done perfectly.”

“That’s an exaggeration,” Kiyotaka said with a smile.

“By the way, Yagashira...” Kota looked at him expressionlessly.

“Yes?”

“My sister wants to ask you something.”

Mizuki looked up at Kota, startled. “Hey, stop that. I was just curious. I didn’t *really* want to ask him.”

“What is it?” Kiyotaka tilted his head.

“Go on.” Kota lightly tapped his sister on the back.

“Jeez,” Mizuki said weakly. “Um, Yagashira...do you have a girlfriend?”

“Yes, I do,” he answered immediately with a smile.

“Of course you do.” She laughed and hit Kota on the back a few times. “See, I told you. There’s no way he wouldn’t.” Then she looked at Kiyotaka and said, “I’m really sorry about this. The other day, I was saying to my brother, ‘Yagashira’s such a great guy. He really is like a prince, so he must have a girlfriend already.’ That’s all it was, so don’t worry about it.”

“I see. Thank you for the compliment.”

“Sorry again. Oh, right, I came to get you because dinner’s ready.”

“Much appreciated. I just happened to be getting hungry.”

Kiyotaka and Mizuki left the bar and went into the neighboring sake store, heading for the break room in the back. The two kurodo were already eating. Like Kiyotaka, they were live-in workers.

“Thanks for your hard work, Yagashira,” one of them said. “Please excuse us for starting first.”

“Don’t worry about it, and same to you,” said Kiyotaka, sitting down at the table.

One of the workers was a man in his mid-thirties named Hisashi Kanda. His short hair was speckled with gray strands, making him appear old for his age. The other worker was a twenty-three-year-old man named Kippe Ueno. He had a baby face that made him seem younger.

The two of them had originally been training at a brewery in the Kanto region called Ishiguro, but when the overseer there passed away due to illness, the business had been forced to close down. Since Ishiguro had been on good terms with Kotani Brewery, the workers had been transferred here. At the time, Kotani’s existing kurodo had all been over sixty years old, so they retired after about a year. As a result, the average age of Kotani Brewery’s workers had decreased sharply in recent years. Others in the community were concerned about them at times, but the business had become more proactive about trying new things. Opening a bar had been part of that initiative.

When Kanda and Ueno had arrived and the veterans were still around—in other words, when Kotani was sufficiently staffed—Kota had studied to become a chef and obtained his license. He had always liked cooking and had been interested in pursuing that path.

However, the one in charge of cooking for the brewery workers was Mizuki. On the table was pork fried with ginger, potato salad, pickled vegetables, and miso soup.

"These are all my favorites," Kiyotaka said happily, clapping his hands together. "Thank you for the food."

"You said that yesterday too," Mizuki replied with a laugh, filling a bowl with rice for him. "You sure are a flatterer."

"Last night it was mackerel cooked in miso, which really is another favorite of mine. Thank you for always providing such delicious meals."

"And thank you for the thanks. That goes for everyone." She looked at Kanda and Ueno and bowed.

Kanda, who was the devoted craftsman type, nodded without making eye contact. Perhaps he was embarrassed. The young Ueno, however, smiled cheerfully and said, "You too."

"You've been here for a week now, Yagashira," said Mizuki. "Have you gotten used to life here yet? It must be hard to wake up so early in the morning."

"It's hard, but I'm enjoying working here."

It was true; sake breweries started work early. At Kotani, the day began at 5:30 a.m. before the sun even rose. Since sake was made in the cold, there wasn't any heating in the cellar. The workers had to operate in the freezing cold. At first, Kiyotaka had been worried about that. But as it turned out, they had to prepare the steamed rice, carry the cooled rice to the fermenting room, put the fermented rice from two days earlier on the trays, and perform the transfer process on the trays from the day before to complete the fermentation—all by 7 a.m. Since there was so much moving around, he didn't feel as cold as he had expected. The furnace was lit at around 6:30 a.m., and it took about fifty minutes for the rice to steam, during which time they had breakfast. After that, there was a mountain of work to be done until evening.

"It must be hard for you too, having to prepare meals on top of working at the store," he continued.

"My brother helps me with the prep work, and working at the store is nothing compared to what everyone else is doing. Besides, I'm used to it. It's been more than ten years since mother passed away..."

She looked at the top of the tea cabinet, where there was a family photo. In it, her father, Takao Kotani, was wearing a suit, and her mother was wearing a yellow and light blue kimono. Kota had been in elementary school at the time, and Mizuki, wearing a short-sleeved dress, had been around five years old. It was probably the last photo they had taken together.

"But you know, even though there are a lot of female brewers

these days, our brewery is still male-only. It's so behind the times. Why are women considered unclean just because of our monthly cycle? It's the twenty-first century!" She pouted.

Kiyotaka smiled gently and said, "Well, despite what excuses people give, men are always soft on women. Brewing sake is heavy labor, and if they didn't have a ban on women, they'd have to push that hard work onto you. Perhaps turning it into a male-only sanctuary was in your best interest."

Mizuki burst out laughing. "Oh, that's a good way of thinking about it."

"Yes. There was also the opinion that having women in the workplace would give the men inappropriate thoughts. In the end, men are idiots."

"It feels strange hearing you say that men are idiots." She giggled.

Kiyotaka put down his chopsticks and clapped his hands together again. "Thank you for the meal."

"I'm really sorry that we have to ask you to help with the bar after this too."

Kiyotaka typically only worked at the brewery, but on Fridays and Saturdays, he also helped out at the bar—but only until 10 p.m. to avoid overloading his schedule.

"I enjoy working at the bar too, and I get paid for it, so it's fine."

"Yeah, but we don't really want to have you stand at the counter too much. It'd be okay if you were staying here forever, but I think the customers will be disappointed when you're gone." She sighed.

Takao, the overseer, came in and said, "In that case, we just need to have him stay forever. Kiyotaka, what do you think of my daughter?" He placed a hand on Mizuki's shoulder. The man was in his fifties and resembled his daughter with his round face and sunny disposition.

Mizuki groaned and facepalmed. "First Kota, now you. Could you stop making things awkward for Yagashira?"

"How about it? Our Mizuki's a pretty nice girl, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is," agreed Kiyotaka.

Mizuki wasn't necessarily a beauty, but she was charming and sweet. The two other workers frowned uncomfortably at this exchange. Apparently, they were interested in her.

"I'm honored, but I'm already dating someone," he continued.

"Oh, I know that. A handsome guy like you must have a girlfriend or two."

"Er, no, I only have one."

"Relationships before marriage don't mean anything."

"Is that how you see it?"

"Well, yeah. Marriage is a contract, so it's a sure thing. Compared

to that, there's nothing set in stone when you're just dating. It's still undecided."

Undecided... Kiyotaka frowned and crossed his arms.

"Leave him alone, dad," said Mizuki, hurriedly putting everyone's empty dishes on a tray and escaping to the kitchen. "I really hate this."

"Ha ha, she's embarrassed," laughed Takao.

"Really?" Kiyotaka tilted his head.

"Oh right, Kiyotaka, there's something I want you to look at while you're here. I've been meaning to ask Seiji about it. Do you mind?" He excitedly placed a wooden box on the table.

"I'd love to."

Kiyotaka took his white gloves out of his pocket and put them on.

"You keep those on you even when you're wearing work clothes, huh?" Takao murmured, impressed.

"What's that?" Kanda and Ueno looked their way.

Kiyotaka opened the lid and took out a ceramic sake bottle. It was white with a red and green pattern on it.

"This is Kiyomizu ware," he said, smiling happily. "This dignified form, smooth and extravagant hand-painting technique, and beautifully elegant style of red painting that originated in China—there is no doubt that this is the work of Eisen Okuda."

"Who's that?" asked Ueno, who had taken an interest in the conversation.

"Ninsei Nonomura and Kenzan Ogata are the most famous Kyoto potters, but there was a second golden age after them in the Bakumatsu period. Potters such as Eisen Okuda, Mokubei Aoki, Dohachi Nin'ami, and Hozen Eiraku came onto the scene and created brilliant works of art."

The workers nodded silently.

"Oh, good," Takao said happily, placing a hand on his chest. "It didn't have the 'Ei' signature, so I thought it might be fake."

"Most of Eisen's works are unsigned," Kiyotaka explained. "Many counterfeiters do include the signature, though, either because they don't know that or because they think the signature makes it easier to fool people."

Takao, Kanda, and Ueno all seemed impressed.

"Hey, Yagashira, how much is that worth?" Ueno asked nonchalantly with a smile.

Kiyotaka looked at Takao. "May I answer that?"

The overseer nodded.

"Well," the young appraiser looked down at the bottle. "As it is, I'd say it's about eight hundred thousand yen. With a nicer box, it would be worth a million."

The box had clearly been made at a later time.

“Eight hundred thousand?!”

Everyone’s eyes widened in shock. They weren’t accustomed to the prices of antiques.

“Would you like to sell it to us?” Kiyotaka asked.

“No.” Takao shook his head. “I inherited this from the previous chief brewer when I took over, and I’m going to do the same with it. I’ll give it to Mizuki’s future husband,” he said, gazing lovingly at the sake bottle.

“I see.” Kiyotaka smiled.

3

When we left the school building after the club meeting, it was almost six in the evening. The January sky was already pitch black.

“See you tomorrow,” I said, waving to Kaori.

As I walked to the bicycle parking area, I took out my phone, wondering if things were all right at Kura. The manager was the type of person who couldn’t stay in one place for long, so I was afraid he might be feeling uncomfortable.

I sent him a message saying, “Thank you for giving me the day off on such short notice. Is everything okay at the store?”

He replied, “Thanks for the concern. Rikyu came to help today, so there’s no need to worry.”

That was a relief. Ever since Holmes had left for training, Rikyu had been helping at the shop more often. Perhaps his schedule had more leeway now that he was done with his university entrance exams. His first choice was the Kyoto Institute of Technology, a national university in Sakyo-ku. It was fairly close to where I lived.

KIT was the alma mater of Rikyu’s mother, Yoshie. She was originally from Kamakura, and she had gone to KIT out of admiration for the city of Kyoto and a desire to obtain a first-class architect license. I had heard that the school focused more on that architect license than its name suggested, and many of its students passed the exam. After graduating, Yoshie had gone on to work for an architectural design firm in the city. Then, after marrying and divorcing Sakyo, she had started her own business. She had also started an art-related business alongside that, because she was—in her own words—an art geek. That was how she had met the owner.

Rikyu also wanted to pursue a first-class architect license. Even though the real test was yet to come, he had said that his “success was assured.”

Relieved by the manager’s reply, I messaged my mother “I’m going to do some shopping before going home,” got on my bike, and

left the campus. As I exited the gate, I saw the club's vice president, Meguro, walking hand-in-hand with a man. I couldn't tell what he looked like because I was looking from behind, but they seemed like a happy couple, so I couldn't help but smile.

I headed down Shimogamo Center Street and turned east onto Kitaoji Street. Upon arriving at the supermarket near Shimogamo Main Street, I got off my bike and went inside. On days when I didn't have work, I took the initiative to make dinner.

"What should I make today?" I murmured quietly as I pushed the shopping cart, looking at the ingredients.

The yellowtail looked fresh, so I grabbed that, mushrooms, and broccoli. *I'm pretty sure we still have carrots and onions at home*, I thought, counting on my fingers.

"Okay, that settles today's menu."

I nodded, paid at the register, and left.

I began pedaling my bicycle, which was now deep red with a wicker basket. This cute bike had become my treasure after Holmes had given it a makeover for Christmas.

"I'm back," I said, popping into the living room with my shopping bag in hand.

"Welcome back," said my mother and grandmother, who were sitting on the couch.

"I'll make dinner now." I put on my apron and washed my hands in the kitchen.

"You don't have to push yourself. You just got home from school," my mother said in an apologetic tone.

"It's okay." I shook my head. "I'm not pushing myself."

It had all begun with me wanting to attend cooking class but not having the time or money to do so. I figured it would be more practical and reasonable to cook at home and ask my mother or grandmother if I ran into something I didn't know. That said, I had only been making simple things based on recipes I found online. Today's dinner was going to be yellowtail fried with garlic mayo, onion soup, and warm vegetable salad.

I went over the instructions in my head:

Sprinkle sake over the yellowtail and let it sit for about five minutes, then wipe it dry with a paper towel and coat it with potato starch.

Put mayonnaise in a frying pan, and when it melts, add the yellowtail and cook on both sides. Season with soy sauce, sake, mirin, garlic paste, and sugar, then sprinkle chopped scallions on top.

While the yellowtail was soaking up the sake, I got started on the onion soup. I put bacon and three large slices of onion in the pressure cooker, added enough water to cover them, poured in a suitable

amount of consommé, and then turned on the heat. For the salad, I simply steamed broccoli, carrots, and cabbage in the microwave and then garnished them with cherry tomatoes. I didn't have any special techniques, but my family was always happy no matter what I cooked, and for that I was grateful.

"Whoa! It's really good, sis!" exclaimed my younger brother, Mutsuki. He was always the first to react.

"He's right," said my mother. "It smells and tastes great."

"Yes, and the yellowtail is so flaky," said my grandmother.

"Yes..."

The final "yes" came from my father, who simply murmured the word and nodded. He didn't openly praise me, but I could tell from his face that he was enjoying it.

"Thanks. I'll make something a little more complicated next time if I have time."

I took a bite of the fried fish and closed my eyes. *It really is good, if I do say so myself.*

"I appreciate that you went to do the grocery shopping after school and made dinner for us, but you don't have to push yourself," said my mother again. "You really have changed, huh?" She put a hand on her cheek, sounding pensive.

"I think so too," my brother agreed. "It's the Holmes effect."

"She's training to be a wife," said my grandmother.

I blushed, not knowing what to say.

My father cleared his throat and frowned, prompting the rest of my family to look at each other and shrug, thinking, *Here we go again.* Whenever we talked about Holmes, it always seemed like my father didn't want to hear about him. He didn't complain, though. He probably wasn't *opposed* to our relationship, but that didn't mean he had to like it.

"You guys are always jumping ahead," I said.

My father nodded earnestly. His reaction was so funny that I couldn't help but laugh.

4

Kiyotaka was behind the counter at Bar Konta, preparing appetizers. There were five customers present: Kanda and Ueno from the brewery and three men who were regulars there.

Kota gave the workers an apologetic look. "You guys are too considerate. You can go to another restaurant, you know?"

The two men shook their heads.

"We're not here because of that," Ueno cheerfully replied. "Your food really does taste good."

“Yeah, if I’m gonna drink somewhere outside, it’s here,” Kanda said curtly, eating his oden.

The regular customers looked up at Kota and nodded.

“As you’d expect from a bar run by a brewery, the alcohol is great and the menu is top-notch.”

Oden, shirako tempura, braised pork belly, stewed beef tendon, skewers, mackerel cooked in miso, simmered squid—Kota was a skilled chef, and all of the dishes went well with sake.

“It’s kind of you to say that, but...” Kota sighed and lowered his gaze.

Kiyotaka, who was standing next to him, glanced at the man and asked, “Is something on your mind?”

“Yeah. It’s been half a year since we opened, and the only visitors we get are a handful of regulars. Most of them come after 8 p.m., so business is slow until then.” Kota looked back up and stared at Kiyotaka. “Is there anything you’ve noticed after a week of observation, Yagashira? I want to get an outside perspective.”

Kiyotaka looked around the restaurant. “Well, the interior is clean and has a cute design. It has a nice atmosphere, and the food and drinks are delicious, but it’s lacking a sense of unity.”

“Unity?”

Everyone blinked in confusion.

“Yes, Bar Konda has a very cute atmosphere with the fox designs on the front sign, coasters, and chopstick holders, but the menu is full of bitter foods geared towards men who like to drink. It just doesn’t match up.”

“Are you saying that I should change the menu?” Kota asked with a conflicted look on his face.

The customers didn’t seem pleased with that idea.

“No, as you can see, the regulars are attached to the current menu. How about keeping these items and adding a few more, if possible? I can suggest a menu that would attract female customers from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m.”

“What would that be?”

“Something with an element of surprise or something mismatched. For example, sake also goes well with carpaccio, cheese, and creamy dishes, so even vanilla ice cream might work.”

“Vanilla?” Kota’s eyes widened.

“Yes, and since you’re already focusing on the fox imagery, I’d definitely suggest adding inari sushi to the menu. It’s also important to have dishes that make people want to take pictures and post them on social media—in other words, a bit of an artistic touch may help. Even something as simple as putting up a sign that says ‘Female customers welcome!’ should make a difference. If you do that, you might be able

to attract more customers before 8 p.m.”

Everyone nodded firmly.

“No wonder they call you the Holmes of Kyoto. I’d expect no less from the young master of the Yagashira family.” Kota looked at Kiyotaka, seeming genuinely impressed.

“Could you please stop calling me ‘young master’?”

“I’m going to get started on a menu for women right away. It’d be nice if I could get some feedback on it...”

“Oh, in that case, should I call my friends from university? If I ask around, I’m sure someone will be willing to come right now.”

Kiyotaka took his phone out of his pocket.

“I guess that’s what it’s like when you’re a ladies’ man,” Ueno teased.

“They’re just friends,” Kiyotaka replied with a laugh.

“I appreciate the help, but why aren’t you inviting your girlfriend?” Kota asked, looking at him curiously.

“She’s still underage, so she can’t drink alcohol.”

“Wait, underage?” Everyone’s eyes widened in shock.

“Isn’t that...a problem?” Kota asked with a serious face.

Kiyotaka held up a hand and said, “Please don’t get the wrong idea. She’s nineteen and she’ll be turning twenty soon.”

Everyone laughed. “You don’t have to panic like that.”

“People keep treating me like a lolicon,” he explained with a light shrug. “Anyway, I’ll ask around.” He looked down at his phone and messaged several of his female friends from university.

5

After dinner, I holed myself up in my room to study. At the same time, I opened my laptop and tried to think of ideas for the club event.

“If we want people to see the flowers, we need to get them to come inside the store first. In that case, a cafe is still a good idea. We could make latte art of flowers... No, I guess that’s not the same as having them see real flowers,” I mumbled as I searched the internet. “I just can’t think of anything.”

I glanced at the clock and saw that it was 10:40 p.m. Holmes was working at the bar run by the brewery today, and I had heard that his shift ended at 10 p.m.

It should be over by now, right? I want to get his advice on the cafe.

I messaged him, “Can I call you?”

My phone immediately rang, making me flinch in surprise. The call was from Holmes. I couldn’t help but laugh at how fast he’d responded.

I picked up the call and said, “Yes, it’s me.”

“Good evening, Aoi.”

There was some background noise on the other end of the phone, and I could tell that he was in the process of walking somewhere.

“Are you still at work?” I asked.

“My shift is over, but I stayed at the bar because a friend from university came to visit today.”

“Sorry to bother you when you’re busy.”

“It’s fine. Do you need my help with something?”

Holmes is as perceptive as ever. All I did was ask if I could call him, and he immediately realized I wanted help.

“It’s not important, so it can wait until tomorrow...”

“No, don’t worry about it. You can ask me now.” His end of the call became quiet as he said that. Apparently, he had gone outside.

I began to explain that I was going to be helping Kaori’s flower arranging club with another event.

“So we discussed ways to get people to see the flowers, but none of them felt right. We decided that we would each come up with an idea before the next meeting, but I can’t think of anything good.” I sighed and looked down.

“I see,” he murmured. “Speaking of flowers, do you remember when we went to Nijo Castle and there was a flower and calligraphy exhibit in the garden?”

“Yes,” I looked back up, “of course I do. It had poems accompanied by flower arrangements, and it was really nice—oh!” I put a hand over my mouth. “You’re right. Poetry and flowers make a great combination. Since the club does Western-style flower arrangements, we can use bold and expressive presentations to get people to see the work.”

“Yes, I agree.”

We could use flowers to express poetry—people who like poems might also be interested in flowers. Putting together the exhibit might take a lot of work, but it’s guaranteed to be interesting for the viewers.

“Thanks, Holmes. I was stuck because I couldn’t think of any good ideas.” I placed a hand on my chest, relieved.

“No need to thank me; I just happened to remember that. I’m glad if I was able to help.”

“Yes, you were a great help.”

Holmes really has a solution for everything. This reminds me of the time he gave the manager a hint by showing him a painting of the Holy Kannon.

“How are things going, by the way?” I asked. “Is working at a brewery hard?”

“It certainly is a lot of work, but I’m enjoying it. The overseer, Takao, is a very nice person. His son, Kota, is honest and kind too.”

“That’s good.” I smiled.

Holmes was undergoing training in Fushimi. Even though it was his closest placement yet, I hadn’t been able to see him at all because of his busy schedule. At this point, the physical distance between us didn’t even matter.

Then I heard a woman’s voice coming from his end.

“Wow, Holmes really is on the phone with his girlfriend!”

“Is there a problem with that?” he replied in the Kyoto accent he used with all of his classmates.

“I just can’t believe it. *You* of all people?”

“I get that a lot. But I’m still on the phone with her, so go back inside.”

“Okaaay.”

“Sorry, Aoi,” he said after shoos his friend away.

“It’s okay.” I shook my head. “Sorry to bother you when you’re busy. I’m sure your friend is waiting for you, so I’ll hang up now. Thanks for the advice, and good night,” I blurted out quickly before hanging up.

“Ugh, I wonder if I sounded weird just now,” I said, slumping over my desk.

I was surprised because I hadn’t expected his visitor to be a woman, but there was actually something else that had been bothering me for a long time now. It felt like it had suddenly been brought to the forefront.

“But it still wasn’t right to hang up on him like that,” I mumbled, feeling depressed.

Suddenly, my phone rang again. It was Holmes.

I hurriedly answered the call. “H-Hello?”

“U-Um, Aoi, are you upset by any chance? The friend visiting me is a woman, but she really is just a friend, and there’s never been anything between us. The bar is offering a menu targeted at women today, so I asked her to come and give us feedback...but I should’ve informed you that I was doing that, right? I’m really sorry,” he said quickly.

His voice was squeaky, and I could tell that he was flustered. I imagined what he must’ve looked like and felt the uncertainty clouding my heart clear up a little.

“I’m sorry for hanging up on you in a weird way. I was surprised that your friend was a woman, but also...it reminded me of what I thought when your university friends came to the store in the past. You seem more relaxed with your female friends than you do with me,” I murmured quietly.

“Huh? What makes you think that?” He sounded genuinely confused, which puzzled me in turn.

“I mean, you talk to your female friends in a casual Kyoto accent, don’t you? But you still use formal speech with me.”

“Oh, is that all it was?” he said in a relieved Kyoto accent. “Don’t scare me like that.”

“It matters to me...”

“My apologies,” he said, returning to formalities. “To me, speaking formally doesn’t mean I don’t feel relaxed. Ever since I was little, I always spoke this way with my father and grandfather—in other words, my own family.”

“Now that you mention it...”

“But I got teased when I talked to my classmates like this, so when I was with my school friends, I used the same language they did. That’s why I still have a habit of speaking casually with school friends and people who are the same age as me.”

Right, Holmes even uses formal language with his own family. But it does make sense that he would get tired of being teased for it at school.

I felt like I could understand how he came to use different speech at school and at home.

“Both my family and school were part of my life, so both speaking styles come naturally to me. I think the fact that my Kyoto accent comes out when I’m emotional is a remnant of my childhood. Believe it or not, I got into fights with my classmates when I was a child.”

Holmes was surprisingly competitive, so he must’ve had some fights with his friends at school. Since he used his Kyoto accent during those, his Kyoto accent came out when his emotions were running high.

“So that’s why.”

“But now that I think about it, only using one or the other feels unnatural to me. When I’m talking to you, I think it feels most natural to speak formally as a base and occasionally bring out the Kyoto accent.”

As he spoke, I felt the lump in my throat melt away.

“Thank you. I’m sorry for getting upset over something so trivial and hanging up on you.”

I was probably on edge because we couldn’t see each other as often as we used to. Even though I pretended to be fine on the outside, the loneliness had been building up.

I should’ve just asked him about it, I thought, hanging my head in self-loathing.

“No, I’m happy that you did,” he replied. “You normally maintain a calm face all the time. It’s only me who’s flipping between hope and fear.”

What? That’s not true at all. Just as I was about to say so...

“I can’t wait to see you again, Aoi,” he whispered in a Kyoto

accent.

I almost stopped breathing. "I want to see you too."

"Really?"

"Yes. I miss you so much that you've been appearing in my dreams lately," I admitted shyly.

Holmes went silent.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, confused.

"You're always so unfair. You can't just say that. I'm appearing in your dreams? That's so dangerous."

"Dangerous? They're not weird dreams, you know? They're normal things like working at Kura together."

"I did assume as much, but now I have to know—what are these 'weird dreams' you're referring to, Aoi?" he asked, suddenly switching to his "wicked" mode.

I was lost for words.

After a moment of silence, he chuckled and said, "Sorry about that. It's an honor to be able to appear in your dreams. Thank you."

"It's not something to thank me for. Do I appear in your dreams, Holmes?"

"Yes, all the time."

"All the time..."

"Yes, it's so normal for you to appear in my dreams that I was surprised you'd ask that question."

I was so happy to hear that that I couldn't help but want to know more. "What kinds of dreams are they?"

"I'd rather not tell you, if possible."

"Huh?"

"When people are asleep, their dreams are under the jurisdiction of their fantasies."

"Jurisdiction of their fantasies?"

"Oh, I should get going now."

"Okay, good night, Holmes."

"Good night, Aoi," he said, ending the call.

I put down my phone and smiled. "I'm glad I told him what was bothering me."

But...

"Jurisdiction of their fantasies?"

After a while, I realized what that was a polite euphemism for. Suddenly feeling embarrassed, I slumped over my desk again.

The second club meeting was held shortly after. This time, instead of a formal meeting, we discussed our ideas while doing club activities

—that is, flower arranging. Since I was still a beginner, Okubo taught me the basics again.

I clumsily stuck the flowers into the water-retaining foam, which was called Oasis. Previously, Okubo had told me that the difference between Japanese and Western flower arranging was that Japanese ikebana was displayed in alcoves while Western flower arrangements were displayed at party venues. She had also said, “Although Western flower arranging has fundamentals and set forms, in my opinion, it has more freedom than ikebana.”

In front of me was a short vase with an Oasis protruding slightly out of it. Today, we were doing a basic “round arrangement.” Basically, the finished piece was supposed to form a dome-like shape. First, we drew a crosshair on the Oasis. Then, we inserted one flower in the center and one on each side to create the foundation. From there, we added more flowers and greenery to give it volume. It was easy to get overwhelmed when taking the final color composition into consideration, but it was pretty fun.

“So, did you all think of something?” Okubo asked as she put together her own arrangement. Hers used tall flowers in a narrow vase.

“Our suggestion is to hold the cafe and exhibit together like last time,” said Osaki, who had paired up with the other second-year student, Shibuya. “We need to get people to come in the first place.”

“But we couldn’t think of a way to get them to look at the flower arrangements,” added Shibuya.

The two second-years were arranging flowers in wicker baskets.

“What about the first-years, then?” asked Okubo, looking at the notebook next to me. “It looks like Mashiro wrote down a lot of notes.”

I had been focusing on the flower arrangement, so the sudden attention startled me. “Oh, yes. In the past, there was an ikebana exhibition in Nijo Castle’s garden where they matched poems to the flowers. It was really pretty, so I thought it’d be nice if we could do the same thing,” I said, holding back my nervousness.

“Ooh,” they murmured.

“So basically, we would each choose a poem we like, create an arrangement to match it, and display them together, right?” Okubo asked, seeming slightly intrigued.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“That sounds great!” Meguro clapped her hands together, her eyes sparkling.

“What about you, Miyashita?” Okubo continued, looking at Kaori, who was arranging white flowers in a glass vase.

Kaori flinched and said hesitantly, “To be honest, I asked my

family about it even though I really shouldn't have..."

Everyone silently waited for her next words.

"And then my mother said, 'You can put up one of our best kimono with the flowers,' so my idea is a kimono and flower exhibit. Sorry for being so business-minded." She gave a light bow.

"That's a good idea, though," said Okubo, folding her arms. "It matches the poetry idea."

"Hey, in that case, why don't we go all the way with the Japanese aesthetic?" said Meguro, clapping her hands again. "Last time, we served black tea, but this time, we can use matcha. It'll be a flower, poetry, and matcha cafe."

"Yes, that would give it a good sense of unity," replied Okubo. "Who agrees with that plan?" She surveyed the room. Everyone raised their hands in approval.

"What was your idea, Okubo?" asked Meguro, glancing at the club president.

Okubo scratched her head sheepishly and said, "Mine was to hold the cafe and put up descriptions of the flower arrangements so that people would look at them, but after hearing the poetry idea, I think that one's the best."

"That's good, then."

"Yep. Also, I have an announcement to make," she added, straightening her back.

Everyone looked at her, wondering what it could be.

"I'll be quitting the club after this event. It'll be my last memory here, so I'm going to give it my all. Let's make this a success," she said with a smile.

Everyone's eyes widened in shock.

"Huh? How come?" asked Meguro, who seemed to be the most surprised of all. "Why are you suddenly quitting?"

"Sorry, Meguro. I'm going to be busy with something, and I have to go job hunting too."

"Can't that wait until fourth year?"

"But when you're retiring from a club, it should be after a big event, right?" Okubo smiled, looking at the rest of us for confirmation. None of us knew what to say, so we awkwardly smiled back. "Aw, don't make those faces. I'll still drop by to say hi. More importantly, we have to work on the event, all right?"

"Okay," we said, caving in to her cheerful words.

After Okubo, Osaki, and Shibuya left the classroom, Kaori and I finished our flower arrangements and started cleaning up. My completed arrangement consisted of bright colors, mainly yellow and orange. The dome shape had come out nicer than expected, so as a

beginner, I was very proud of it.

As I was putting the flowers into a paper bag, I glanced at the windows. Meguro was gazing outside, perfectly still. She seemed to be quite shocked that Okubo was quitting.

“Meguro, we’re leaving now,” said Kaori.

“What should I do?” the vice president murmured, looking down.

“Meguro?” I asked. *Is she okay?* I peered into her face and saw tears welling up in her eyes.

“What if Okubo doesn’t like me anymore? Is that why she decided to quit?”

“That’s not possible,” Kaori said, smiling to reassure the girl.

Meguro kept her head down. “Don’t you think it’s strange that she announced it to everyone without telling me anything? We’ve been running this club together all this time. I wish she would’ve talked to me beforehand.” She bit her lower lip.

Her reasoning did make sense. “Maybe she didn’t tell you because she thought you’d object,” I said quietly.

The girl fell silent. After some time, she raised her head and looked at us and said, “Um, if you get a chance, could you please find out why Okubo suddenly decided to quit?”

“Huh?” Kaori and I responded in unison.

“I can’t help but worry about it. If the problem is me, I don’t think she’ll answer me even if I ask her directly.”

“Yeah, but...” Kaori sounded hesitant.

“You two are younger and not directly involved, so she might tell you the truth, don’t you think? Please,” she begged us, teary-eyed.

Kaori and I looked at each other and gave her a reluctant “Sure...”

“I said we went to the same high school, but we’ve actually been together since middle school. It was a combined private school.”

“Since middle school?” *That’s a long time*, I thought, surprised.

“I was going to continue on to the school’s university division, but Okubo said she was going to Kyoto Prefectural, so I decided to go here too and join the same club as her. We’ve been together for a really long time, so when she suddenly said she was quitting, I thought she might not like me anymore,” she continued, her shoulders trembling.

I finally understood why she felt so strongly about it. Based on their friendship, this shouldn’t have happened.

“I’m sorry for this weird request, but please help me.” She bowed deeply. Seeing our senior lower her head to us like that, we couldn’t possibly refuse.

After the vice president left the room, Kaori heaved a sigh and scratched her head. “I’ve always thought that Meguro reminds me of my sister.”

“Oh, Saori...”

Kaori's older sister, Saori, was a former Saio-dai. She'd been gifted with both intelligence and beauty and had a gentle, relaxed demeanor. Indeed, she was a similar type of person to Meguro.

"If you ask me, I don't think Okubo dislikes Meguro. I think she's trying to do something about the fact that they're too dependent on each other," Kaori said, putting her hands on her hips.

I gave a vague nod. "Maybe...but is that really all it is?" I murmured quietly, looking up at the sunset.

7

When Holmes called me that night, I told him about what had happened.

"She probably has a guilty conscience," he said without hesitation. He had understood everything from that simple explanation and offered his opinion.

I, however, couldn't keep up with his sharp mind. "What do you mean?"

"Meguro feels guilty about something, which is why she can't ask Okubo herself. She asked you and Kaori to find out in her stead, but I suspect that she knows better than anyone else what the reason was," he answered smoothly.

"But if she knew, she wouldn't need to ask us in the first place."

"She asked you because she doesn't want it to be true."

"Oh," I replied weakly. I sympathized with that feeling because I used to be the same way. Back when I heard the rumor that my ex and my best friend had started going out, I'd wanted to rush back because I didn't want it to be true. I'd been hoping it was some kind of misunderstanding. "So Meguro is curious because of her guilty conscience."

Since they've been best friends since middle school, they must've gone through a lot over the years. It wouldn't be surprising if Meguro sometimes thought, "Didn't I do something terrible back then?" But since her best friend would smile and let things slide, she must've been relieved, thinking that she'd been forgiven. And now, all of her past guilt has suddenly come back to haunt her. I lowered my gaze, feeling bitter.

"Aoi, this isn't something for you to worry about. It's between Meguro and Okubo. Okubo has probably found her own answer, which is why she announced her resignation without telling Meguro anything beforehand. I'm sure her desire to make the event a success is real, so please do your best to turn it into a wonderful memory."

Holmes is right. The best thing for me to do in this situation is try my best to make the event a success.

I thanked him and ended the call.

After talking to Aoi on the phone outside, Kiyotaka put his phone in his pocket and gazed at the night sky. The faintly lit row of breweries under the stars made for a lovely ambience, and the cool air felt nice. As he was stretching, Kota peeked out from the bar and beckoned to him. The bar had already closed for the night and was being cleaned up.

Kiyotaka bowed lightly and went inside, where Mizuki was sitting at the counter.

"I've come up with a new menu for women, so I want you to taste test it," Kota said, going behind the counter.

Mizuki tapped the seat beside her and said, "You can sit next to me, Yagashira."

"All right."

As Kiyotaka sat down, Kota picked up a light blue bottle and showed it to him. "We have a type of sake that's as easy to drink as wine. I thought of some dishes to pair with it that would appeal to women, like you said. First is sea bream carpaccio...although I only made a sample-sized portion." He placed the sake and carpaccio in front of the two taste testers.

"Thank you for the food," Kiyotaka said, clapping his hands together. He took a sip of the sake and ate the fish. "It goes well with this smooth sake. I like it."

"Yeah," Mizuki agreed.

"Next is baked oysters with cheese. I also made fried tomato and avocado with cheese and basil sauce."

The oysters were presented as shells filled with oyster gratin, baked to perfection. The fried tomato and avocado were skewered bite-size pieces covered in green basil sauce.

"Both of these are delicious," said Kiyotaka.

"Yeah, they're definitely good," said Mizuki, joining him in relishing the food. "I can never beat you when it comes to cooking no matter how hard I try. You're just like mother. Dad said he married her because she won his stomach over." She placed a hand on her cheek as she spoke.

Kota smiled gently and said, "Your cooking is good too, Mizuki. You're ready to become a bride."

"There you go again, trying to marry me off. Gimme a break. You're the last person I want to hear that from." She angrily looked away.

Kota shrugged and continued with the menu. "This is Bar Konta's special miniature inari sushi. I call it the Foxtail."

The inari sushi came in bite-size pieces reminiscent of a fox's tail.

"Oh, you made it," remarked Kiyotaka. "I love inari sushi."

Mizuki had been sulking, but the sight of the young man happily eating the sushi made her burst out laughing. “You really do seem to enjoy everything.”

“Yes, because they’re truly delicious,” replied Kiyotaka.

“Thanks,” said Kota, bowing shyly. “By the way, did you know that there’s a correct order to drink sake in?” he asked cheerfully. He wasn’t usually this talkative, but perhaps he was in a good mood today.

“According to my grandfather, ‘Drink the good sake first because you’ll be drunk later.’”

Kota laughed and nodded. “Yeah, he’s not wrong. It’s generally said that it’s best to start with light flavors and gradually raise the intensity. You should start with daiginjo or sparkling sake, then move on to ginjo or honjozo. After that comes junmai ginjo, junmai, and yamahai or kimoto. Aged sake comes last.”

“I see. Going from light to strong flavors is the same way that sushi is eaten.”

“Yeah,” Mizuki said with a laugh.

After that, Kota continued to bring out dishes that would go well with sake and appeal to women. The last item was bite-sized cheesecake.

“Besides vanilla ice cream, I heard that sake also goes well with cheesecake, so I tried making a small one.”

“It really does,” said Mizuki, holding a hand to her mouth. “I can’t believe it.”

Kiyotaka had a pensive look on his face as he ate the cake.

“Do you think it doesn’t work?” Kota asked anxiously.

“No, it goes well with the sake and it tastes good. I was just thinking that having cheesecake here suddenly makes it feel like a cafe in a way that vanilla ice cream wouldn’t. It might be even better if you give it a twist.”

“A twist?”

“Yes, for example—”

As they were talking, Takao came into the bar and said, “Kiyotaka, do you have a minute?”

Kiyotaka furrowed his brow slightly at the serious look on the supervisor’s face. “Yes,” he said, standing up.

They went into the back room and Takao checked to make sure no one else was around.

“Did something happen?” Kiyotaka asked.

“I’m in trouble,” Takao whispered in a low voice. He presented an empty wooden box. “It’s gone, Kiyotaka. The Eisen Okuda sake bottle is missing.”

“What?” Kiyotaka blinked.

"It might've been stolen." The man's face was pale.

Kiyotaka looked at the empty box again. No one had paid any attention to the Kotani family's sake bottle before—not until they had discovered that it was worth eight hundred thousand yen. He had also told them that the box didn't have much value.

"Where did you store it after my appraisal?"

"After that, I put it back on the shelf in my room right away. It's always been there. What should I do?" Takao looked down at the box.

"Do you want me to question the others?"

"No, we don't know for sure yet that it's been stolen, and I don't want to act like I'm suspecting our workers."

"But you do suspect them, don't you?"

Takao looked down weakly.

"Why don't you at least ask Mizuki about it? She might've taken it out for one reason or another."

"That's what I thought at first, so I did ask her, but she said she didn't know. So I looked all around the house but couldn't find it anywhere."

"In that case, may I see your room first?"

"Yes, it's this way."

He led him to a Japanese-style room right above the sake store. The shelves were adorned with his predecessor's collection of vases and tea bowls. All of them were good pieces in their own way.

The entrance to the room was an ordinary sliding door without a lock.

"Anyone could enter this room if they wanted to," remarked Kiyotaka.

"Yeah." Takao nodded with a grimace.

"Where did you put the sake bottle?"

"Over there," he said, pointing at the top of the shelf in the alcove. "I kept it there inside the box."

Kiyotaka put on his gloves and examined the shelf and floor.

"Like you said, I think one of our guys did it, but I don't want to make a scene. If it becomes public knowledge, we won't be able to work together anymore. I'm sure someone just caved to temptation," Takao added with downcast eyes.

"You're very lenient."

"Everyone makes mistakes. And besides, I'm not that anxious about it."

"Why not?"

"Unlike other things, that was an antique. If they resell it, the Yagashira family's network will be able to find out where it was sold to right away."

"That's true..." Kiyotaka looked down at the floor. "I understand. I

agree that it's better not to make a scene. Let's wait and see what happens for now. Like you said, if the thief puts it up for sale, we'll be able to find it quickly using my grandfather's network. It's also possible that the bottle will quietly return on its own."

"You think they'll have a change of heart?" Takao looked at him expectantly.

"Not quite." Kiyotaka gave a small sigh and muttered, "When it comes back, its value may have changed..."

9

Meanwhile, I had no idea that Holmes had also encountered trouble on his end. The next day, during lunch break, Kaori and I went to find Okubo, hoping to probe for an answer while asking questions about the event. We had heard that she often tended the flower beds on campus during this time, and sure enough, she was watering them with a hose.

"Okubo," we called out.

"Oh," she said, turning off the water and looking at us. "Hello, Miyashita, Mashiro."

"Shibuya told us that you often water the flowers at this time of day, and you really are here," said Kaori.

"Yes." The club president looked around at the flowers. "At first I did it because a teacher asked me to, but now I take the initiative to do it. I secretly think of them as my own flower beds." She laughed mischievously. I could tell that she loved plants from the bottom of her heart.

"Did you choose KPU because it's close to the botanical gardens?" I asked.

Okubo sheepishly scratched her head and said, "I guess the cat's out of the bag. Yeah, that's exactly why. I told my parents that there was a program I wanted to participate in at KPU, but my main reason for coming here was because I was impressed by the city and the gardens when I came for sightseeing. And KPU is right next door, you know?"

"So that's why. Did Meguro follow you to KPU because she admired you?" I asked casually.

"No." Okubo shook her head. "I invited her. I was like, 'Do you want to come with me?' She was surprised, but she said, 'I love Kyoto, so if you're going, I will too.'"

I was so sure that Meguro followed her here because she didn't want to be separated from her, but apparently it was Okubo's suggestion.

Slightly surprised, I continued my line of questioning. "Did you and Meguro start the club yourselves?"

“No, it existed beforehand. When I was a first-year, most of the members were third-years, so they’ve all graduated.”

“I see.”

“Okubo, what’s the real reason why you’re suddenly quitting? Meguro was really shocked,” Kaori asked, startling me by getting straight to the point. She’d never been one for beating around the bush.

“Yeah, she would be,” Okubo replied with a strained smile. Based on her reaction, she had made her decision knowing that Meguro would be shocked by it.

“Do you think it’s time for you guys to move on from being joined at the hip?” Kaori pressed her.

Okubo looked up at the sky. “It’s true that I can’t keep playing around now that my third year’s almost over, but I guess that’s part of it too.” Her mouth was smiling but her eyes were sad.

I could understand why she’d try to distance herself from her best friend. They’d been so close to each other that they could’ve been considered dependent on each other. But there had to have been a catalyst that spurred her to take action, and Meguro wanted to know what that catalyst was. In fact, she probably already had an idea. Something she felt guilty about that would make Okubo dislike her...

“So what did you need from me?” she asked, interrupting my thoughts.

“Oh, um, one of my friends is part of the Japanese sweets club. I mentioned that we were going to hold a flower, poetry, and matcha cafe in the Demachiyanagi shopping street, and she asked if we could serve her club’s sweets there. Here’s their flyer,” I said, taking out the flyer I’d received from the club.

Okubo’s eyes lit up. “Sure, that’s a great idea. We do need sweets to go with the tea, and I’d love to collaborate with them. I’m sure they know more about sweets that go with matcha than I do. Can I leave them to you? I’ll be consulting with the shop.”

“Okay, I’ll handle the discussions with the Japanese sweets club, then.” I nodded and jotted down a memo in my notebook.

“You’re really reliable, Mashiro. Is it because you’ve been working for a long time?”

I blushed. “No, I’m really not.”

“You don’t have to be humble. I think you’ll make a great employee in the future. I can see you as an excellent secretary.”

“No, not at all...”

I wasn’t being humble. I had seen from up close what a truly excellent person was like. *I’ll never reach that level no matter how hard I try.* I smiled stiffly as I thought of Holmes.

“Anyway, sorry to bring this up again, but my mom asked if it’d

be okay to put a Miyashita Fabrics flyer next to the kimono,” Kaori said apologetically, showing Okubo the flyer.

“It’s fine,” Okubo replied with a nonchalant laugh. “I’m sure some of the visitors will be getting ready for their coming-of-age ceremonies.”

Relieved, Kaori placed a hand on her chest. “Thank you very much.”

“This event is going to be a lot of fun,” Okubo said with a cheerful smile.

“Yeah.” We nodded.

With the outline of the event decided, there was only one problem left: I had to create a display piece too. In other words, I had to choose a poem and arrange flowers to match. *What poem would be good?*

After class, I went to Kura for my shift.

“Aoi, is something the matter?” the manager asked nervously. He had been working on his manuscript at the counter. His tone of voice was so similar to Holmes’s that hearing it while lost in thought made my heart skip a beat.

“Huh?” I looked at him.

The manager pointed between his eyebrows. “You’ve had wrinkles here for a while now.”

I guess I’d been making a stern face while I was cleaning.

“Sorry, I was thinking about something.” I hurriedly smoothed out the wrinkles with my finger.

“Is something troubling you?” he asked with a concerned look in his eyes.

“No.” I shook my head. “I was thinking about what to make for a club event.”

“Oh, yes. If I recall correctly, you said you were helping Kaori’s flower arranging club.”

“Yes. We’re going to have an exhibit where we display flower arrangements that correspond to poems, and I don’t know what kind of poem would be good.”

“That sounds tough. Are you writing the poems yourselves?”

“No, we’re using texts by famous poets.”

“I see. We have a lot of poetry collections on the bookshelf, so feel free to look at them,” he suggested with a gentle smile, wrinkles forming at the corners of his eyes.

“Thank you.” I went to the bookshelf with my feather duster. *I hope I can find a poem that perfectly fits my current feelings...*

“It’s not like you to make that expression, so I thought there might’ve been something bothering you.” He seemed relieved.

I shrugged and forced a smile. It was true that I had been thinking

about Meguro and Okubo as well. The manager wasn't as perceptive as Holmes, but he was sensitive to people's emotions. *Maybe he can understand the subtleties of Meguro and Okubo's feelings.*

"There was actually a bit of drama between the senior members of the club." I told him that the president had suddenly quit, her best friend since middle school thought it could be her fault, and that I had been asked to find out why.

"I see. That sounds like it could be a problem driven by illicit love."

"Huh?" I squeaked. I had *not* been expecting those provocative words from the calm and elegant manager's mouth. "Illicit...love?" I blinked, thinking I'd misheard.

"Sorry for the crude phrasing. They're young women, so I think the issue might involve a man..."

I gave a vague nod and suddenly remembered that Meguro had been walking hand-in-hand with her boyfriend. *How long have they been going out?*

"When two friends are close, they develop the same taste in men, and then it becomes hard for them to get along," he murmured as he wrote.

"It's sad, but it might be true."

"Are you all right, Aoi?"

"Huh?"

"Do you and Kaori have similar tastes in men?" he asked awkwardly. His question made me realize that he still thought *I* might be the troubled one. He was considering the possibility that Kaori had fallen in love with Holmes.

"No, I don't think I have to worry about that. According to her, Holmes is 'one step away from being physiologically unacceptable.'"

The manager's eyes widened in shock. "One step away from being physiologically unacceptable?"

"Yes. Holmes is too perceptive, and even though he's black-hearted, he seems like a great person at first glance. She can't help but think of him as suspicious."

His eyes widened further and then he burst out laughing. "I'm amazed—by Kaori and by you."

"Huh? Why me?"

"I'm sure if Kiyotaka were here, he'd say, 'You're too cruel, Aoi.'"

Huh? I blinked.

The manager continued to chuckle as if he couldn't stop. "I always thought that the person who became his girlfriend would only love him for his appearance. I never thought that someone like you would appear in his life. He's a lucky man."

"That's not true," I said, averting my gaze. It felt like he was

10

If the manager was right about this incident stemming from “illicit love,” then it would be natural to think that Meguro’s boyfriend was the cause. Perhaps Meguro was worried that Okubo liked him too.

As I was looking for books in the school library, I ran into the second-years, Osaki and Shibuya.

“Oh!” we all said.

“Are you looking for poetry books too, Mashiro?” asked Shibuya.

“Yes, I found this one.” I showed them the cover of the poetry collection I’d picked up. It had easier-to-understand explanations than the books in Kura.

“I’ll go with this,” said Osaki, taking a copy of *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* from the shelf.

Shibuya looked at the bookshelf and groaned. “There’s too much to choose from. Maybe Akiko Yosano would be good.”

“She wrote a lot of passionate love poems, didn’t she? You have a boyfriend, so that’s nice. I’m jealous.” Osaki pouted and glanced at her friend.

“We’re not the kind of couple that people envy. We’re both chubby, so we make fun of ourselves by saying we’re a fat couple,” Shibuya replied with a weak smile.

“What’s with that heartwarming, super friendly dynamic? Now I’m even more jealous.”

“Nah, you should be jealous of Meguro and her boyfriend.”

“Oh, yeah, he’s really cool. He’s in grad school, right?”

“Yeah, he’s such a great guy. I think she said his name was Kajiwara.”

Could it be? “Are you talking about Haruhiko Kajiwara, by any chance?” I asked.

“I think that was his name.” Shibuya nodded.

Meguro’s boyfriend is Akihito’s younger brother. What a small world.

“Um, when did they start going out?”

They looked at each other.

“When was it?” asked Osaki.

“I think she said it was before Christmas,” said Shibuya, folding her arms.

Osaki clapped her hands. “Right, they met at a Christmas party.”

“Huh?” Shibuya tilted her head. “Did they? I heard that he was Okubo’s friend, so I thought Okubo introduced them to each other.”

“Yeah, Okubo and Kajiwara were friends who took care of the flower beds together, but Meguro met him at the Christmas party. She

said she really put herself out there since she'd always had a crush on him."

As I listened to them talk, I felt like I had grasped the situation, though I couldn't be certain yet. Haruhiko, who they described as "a great guy," was originally a close friend of Okubo's. Meguro secretly had a crush on him, and when they met at the Christmas party, she proactively pursued him, and they started dating. About a month later, Okubo announced that she was quitting the club without saying anything to Meguro beforehand.

I think we have a clear answer now, don't we?

I parted ways with the second-years and left the library.

"Oh, it's Aoi."

Speak of the devil. Haruhiko Kajiwarara was standing in the hallway, smiling and holding a book. I gulped.

"What a coincidence," he continued. "Were you borrowing a book?"

"Oh, yes. Did you come to return one?"

"Yep." He nodded. "Come to think of it, Holmes is training at Kotani Brewery right now, isn't he?"

"I'm surprised you knew."

"I heard it from Ijuin when he came to our house the other day. My late father liked Kotani's sake. I think he originally found out about them through Seiji Yagashira."

Kyoto's web of connections would never cease to amaze me. Ijuin was the manager's pen name.

"I wonder how Kota's doing," he murmured with a nostalgic air.

Holmes had told me about the people working at the brewery, so I knew who Kota was even though we hadn't met.

"You know the family too, huh?" I remarked.

"I only know Kota. He used to deliver sake to us."

"Oh, I see." *That makes sense.*

"Sometimes my dad would force him to drink, and then my brother would have to send him home." He chuckled.

I silently nodded.

"There was something else that left an impression on me too. I'm only going to say this because it happened five years ago, but it seemed like he was having an affair."

"A-An affair?" I blinked.

"It's only a maybe. One time when Kota was drunk, he cried and said he was in pain because he fell in love with someone he wasn't allowed to. My dad warned him that cheating could mean risking his life."

I fell silent. *I guess no one has it easy.* Holmes had said that Kota

was honest and kind. Someone like him would surely torment himself if he had an affair.

Haruhiko seems to have a pretty loose tongue. Maybe I can get some information out of him.

"I've actually been helping the flower arranging club, so I know Meguro. You're going out with her, right?" I asked, boldly broaching the subject.

Haruhiko's face turned bright red. "Yeah, we are. Man, now I'm embarrassed."

"I heard that you were also good friends with her best friend, Okubo."

He suddenly grimaced. "Yeah, but I don't think I'll be talking to her anymore." He looked a bit angry, which surprised me.

"Why not?"

"When I told her that I was going out with Meguro, she bad-mouthed her. She was like, 'I honestly can't recommend her. Aren't there better people out there?' I couldn't believe it because I thought they were best friends. Oh, but I didn't tell my girlfriend about it since it'd hurt her feelings. Keep this between us, all right?" Apparently he was capable of keeping his mouth shut when necessary.

I nodded and let out a small sigh. *Well, that settles it.*

After class, when Kaori and I were alone in the clubroom, I told her what I had heard at the library.

"So in the end, Okubo had a crush on Meguro's boyfriend," she immediately concluded.

"Okay, so it's not just me." I sighed. "But I'm sure Meguro is hoping that's not the case."

"Really?" Kaori frowned slightly.

"You don't think so?"

"I think she already had a vague idea of what was going on, but we won't know unless we ask her. Anyway, did you choose a poem?"

"Yeah, I managed to find one that was perfect for me."

"That's nice. I haven't been able to find the right one," she lamented, slumping her shoulders.

If she's struggling this much with it, maybe she's in love too?

"What happened with Kohinata?" I asked.

At the beginning of the year, I had gone to a casual New Year's party with Holmes, Kaori, and Holmes's friend, Kohinata, who was interested in Kaori. We had gone to a Chinese restaurant and eaten delicious food from a revolving tray. It had been a fun, peaceful dinner. After that, it seemed like Kohinata had asked for Kaori's contact information and she had given it to him.

"He messages me sometimes and I reply, but nothing's come of it.

He's a smart guy so I like talking to him, and he's decent as a friend, but I don't like him that way."

That's too bad. "Is there someone else you like?"

Kaori blushed slightly and said, "I don't know if I *like* him, but there's someone I'm interested in."

"I see," I said with a happy smile. "If you ever want to talk about it, let me know."

"Thanks. I like that about you, Aoi."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"You can tell how I feel, so you don't try to pry more than necessary."

"That goes for you too."

"Nah, I'm pretty nosy, so when there's something I want to know, I can't help but ask."

"No, you say things bluntly, but you do know when to take a hint. Oh, but if there's anything you want to ask me, feel free."

"Really? There's something I've always been wondering."

"Huh? What is it?" I asked anxiously.

"Holmes still scares me, but I know that he's charming. I can understand why you were attracted to him."

I nodded.

"But what about your previous boyfriend?! Every time I hear about your ex, I think, 'Why were you going out with someone like that?'"

She really does say things bluntly. "That's a good question," I said with a chuckle. "In our third year of middle school, he confessed to me before the school trip in front of everyone in the class."

"What?!"

"Back then, I mistook it for manliness..."

"Oh...well, you were still in middle school, after all."

"Yeah. It was the first time someone had ever confessed their feelings to me, so I was really happy. When I look back on it now, I realize that we were both still kids."

"But that confession was kind of cowardly. It's hard to reject someone when they ask you out in front of everyone."

"Yeah, that's true."

As we were talking, the classroom door opened and Meguro came in.

"Miyashita, Mashiro," she greeted us.

"Hello, Meguro," I replied.

"Hi. About what I asked you to do..." She walked up to us with nervousness and anticipation in her eyes.

"After asking around, we think it might have to do with you getting a boyfriend," Kaori said, getting straight to the point. I was

again surprised by how forward she was being.

Meguro looked down weakly and said, "Is that really it? Did Okubo like Kajiware?" Judging from how she called him by his surname, their relationship probably hadn't progressed very far.

"Did you notice?" I asked quietly.

"Well, he was originally a good friend of Okubo's, and when I saw them from afar, I thought they made a good match. But whenever I asked Okubo if she liked him, she always said, 'No, he's just a friend. I don't love him.' At first I thought she was just too shy to admit it." Meguro stood by the window and gazed into the distance. "At some point, I fell in love with him too, so I kept checking with her. If she liked him then I'd back off. But her answer never changed, so I made up my mind and asked, 'Does that mean I can fall in love with him, then?' I said it jokingly, of course. And Okubo laughed and said, 'You're free to do whatever you want. Go ahead.'" She let out a long sigh.

As I listened to her story, I found myself sympathizing with her. A little while after they had started dating, Okubo had announced that she was quitting the club. It was only natural that Meguro would wonder if Okubo had been lying the entire time—if she had liked him all along.

"Also, after I started going out with Kajiware, it seemed like he and Okubo became more distant. Okubo probably stopped hanging out with him out of consideration for me, and Kajiware said to me, 'Maybe you should stop being so buddy-buddy with her.' I wonder if something happened between them..."

Haruhiko was probably warning her because of Okubo's bad-mouthing. But what were Okubo's real intentions? If she had kept her feelings to herself out of consideration for Meguro, would she have distanced herself like this? The only reason I can think of is...

"What if Okubo didn't realize she was in love until you started going out with him?"

"That's possible," said Kaori.

"Do you think so? She wasn't lying and stepping back for my sake, she simply didn't realize her feelings until later?" Meguro murmured, frowning her brow.

"I think that could be it," replied Kaori. "If that's the case, it's not your fault. It's not Okubo's fault either, of course. Isn't that why she wanted to distance herself?"

Meguro nodded with a bitter expression on her face. "Yeah... I've been with Okubo for a long time, and I believed that we'd always be together, but now that it's come to this, maybe it's time to move on," she said as if trying to persuade herself. Then she looked at us and said, "Thanks, and sorry for the weird request. If Okubo wasn't

backing off for my sake, then I can feel a bit better. But thinking about her feelings still makes my heart ache...”

We didn’t know what to say in response to her listless smile, nor did we have any idea that Okubo had been listening to our conversation outside the classroom.

11

It was the day before the Demachi Masugata shopping street festival.

“Tomorrow’s the day, huh? Do your best,” Holmes said cheerfully from the other end of the phone.

“Thanks. It was already a lot of work today, though.” I shrugged.

“Oh, did you arrange the flowers today?”

“Yes,” I said, impressed that he knew. Today, we had gone to the cafe to create the flower arrangements and set up the exhibit.

“Can you show me what you made?” he asked. He wouldn’t be able to come to the event because of work.

“I’ll show you the picture tomorrow. That’s when the exhibit is, after all.”

“What?” he replied in a disappointed voice.

I giggled. “Oh, right, I wanted to show you Okubo’s work. I’ll send it now.”

“All right. But still...” He sighed. “I’m surprised that Akihito’s younger brother, Haruhiko, is Meguro’s boyfriend.”

“Yeah. They say it’s a small world, but Kyoto is especially small.”

“So what did Okubo make?”

“I just sent it. When I saw her flowers and poem, I understood how she really felt.”

Okubo’s piece was made up of light purple flowers called *misebaya*, or the October Daphne. They were connected by the stems, forming the shape of a necklace. The poem she had chosen was:

“I wish to show you, for even the sleeves of the fishermen of Ojima, battered by the waves, do not change color.” — Inbumon’in no Taifu

It was a sorrowful poem that meant, “I wish to show you my kimono sleeve, which has changed color from the bitter tears I shed thinking about you. Even the sleeves of the fishermen of Matsushima’s Ojima Island do not change color when wet by the waves.” The first part, “I wish to show you,” was read as “*misebaya*”—matching the flowers Okubo had used.

“Okubo really is suffering from her love...” *So much that her sleeve would change color from her tears.* “Meguro went pale when she read the poem. It was hard for her to stomach.”

I heaved a sigh, but Holmes said nothing.

“Holmes?”

“The poem doesn’t match the flowers.”

“Huh?”

“Aoi, it’s possible that...”

His words made my eyes widen in disbelief.

12

The next day was the day of the event. We were to arrive early in the morning to get ready. As I entered the Demachi Masugata shopping street, I saw that it was decorated with colorful banners and triangular flags. This arcade was smaller than the one at Teramachi-Sanjo, so it had a more local feel to it. As usual, the large welcome signs and the chalkboards with cute drawings on them filled me with energy. Since it was a Setsubun festival, the street was lined with stalls and there were large oni masks.

In our space, one corner was dedicated to benches covered with red cloth, displaying a vermilion umbrella and a dazzling furisode kimono from Miyashita Kimono Fabrics. Our flower arrangements were lined up on a long table along the wall covered in a black tablecloth. The flower-shaped desserts made by the Japanese sweets club had arrived, so we put a sign out front that said “Flower, Poetry, and Matcha Cafe” and opened up the shop. Our friends and acquaintances stopped by as well as shoppers visiting the arcade.

“It’s so nice that you matched the arrangements to poems,” said one visitor.

“They go perfectly with the poems,” said another.

I was glad that the theme of the exhibit got them to look more closely at the works. One of the second-years, Osaki, had chosen a poem by Shikibu Izumi:

“Lost in thought, I cannot but look at the sky, though my beloved shall not come falling from the heavens.”

Osaki had said that she didn’t have a boyfriend, but there must’ve been someone she liked. Her arrangement used tall flowers that looked like they were reaching for the sky.

The other second-year, Shibuya, who did have a boyfriend, had followed her plan of choosing a poem by Akiko Yosano:

“I long for you when I sleep and when I wake, when I comb my raven hair, when I gaze at the handle of my writing brush.”

It was a passionate love poem that you wouldn’t expect from a heartwarming couple. She had used flowers with deep colors such as red and purple to create an impactful arrangement. When her boyfriend came, he started out with a relaxed laugh, saying, “I don’t know much about flowers or poetry, but it’s pretty.” But as soon as he

read the explanation of the archaic language and realized it meant “my thoughts are always filled with you,” he went bright red. It was so sweet that it made Kaori and me giggle.

Meguro, the vice president, had chosen a poem by Takashina no Takako:

“’Tis difficult for the words ‘I will never forget you’ to last ‘til the distant future, thus do I wish my life would end today having heard them.”

It was a poem about the uncertainty of love: “I’m very happy to hear you say that you will never forget me, but no one knows what will happen in the distant future, so I would rather die with this happiness.” Her arrangement consisted of ivy and a single rose. It expressed the passion of love and how the happiness of the present brings forth feelings of uncertainty about the future.

Kaori and I were both startled when Haruhiko arrived. Meguro had a tense look on her face because she was conscious of Okubo’s feelings, but her boyfriend’s visit proceeded without issue. Okubo greeted him but said nothing else, and he didn’t say anything to her either.

“It’s hard to look at Okubo,” Kaori murmured wistfully. “Unrequited love is painful, isn’t it?”

I looked at Okubo, who was hanging her head, and nodded in agreement. It was cruel that she had to be in the same place as the person whose love had come true.

“Aoi, Kaori,” a voice called out, startling us out of our listless mood.

I blinked in surprise. “You came to visit, Manager?”

“Yes, I wanted to see your flower arrangements,” he said gently before shifting his attention to my best friend. “Hello, Kaori.”

“H-Hello, thank you very much for coming.” Her face was bright red and her eyes were spinning.

She must be really surprised.

Suddenly, she raised her head and pointed at her work. “U-Um, this one is mine.”

The manager looked down at it with great interest. “This is...a poem by Ono no Komachi, I see.” He glanced at my poem and tilted his head. “Aoi’s seems to be Ono no Komachi too. Did you pick matching ones on purpose?”

“Oh, no, it was just a coincidence,” answered Kaori.

Kaori and I had happened to choose the same poet, but our poems were different. Hers was:

“Yearning has exhausted me, so I wish to sleep a little. I may meet him in my dreams; if not, I may at least forget.”

“It conveys a sad but endearing love,” remarked the manager. “And this arrangement fits the poem perfectly,” he added, looking at

the green-based arrangement of snowdrops and globe thistles with a gentle smile. "It makes me think of a sigh of love. It's very nice."

Kaori blushed to the point where her ears turned red, said a quiet "Thanks," and lowered her head.

The manager then looked at my piece and exclaimed, "Oh! Yours is lovely too, Aoi. Kiyotaka would be overjoyed if he saw it."

"He can't come, so I was going to take a picture and send it to him. It's kind of embarrassing, though." It was an embodiment of my own feelings of love, after all.

"Oh, don't say that. You should send it since he's working so hard in an unfamiliar place. That's right, shall we pay Kotani Brewery a visit sometime?"

"Okay."

After that, more guests came and enjoyed the tea and sweets, looked at the flowers and poetry, and left in a relaxed mood. The festival event at Demachi Masugata wasn't a roaring success, but it was quite well received, so we were very satisfied as we began to clean up. Just as I picked up my flower arrangement, getting ready to leave—

"Aoi," came a nostalgic voice from behind me.

I turned around in surprise and saw Holmes wearing a down jacket over his work clothes.

"I slipped out during the evening break," he explained as he walked up to me, sounding out of breath. "Is the exhibit over already?"

"Whoa, isn't Aoi's boyfriend really cool?" remarked Osaki, her eyes wide open.

"Yeah, what a surprise!" Shibuya agreed, equally shocked.

Feeling embarrassed, I walked towards Holmes, meeting him halfway. "The cafe is closed, but I haven't put away my work yet. Here it is," I said, turning around and pointing at it.

"This is yours..." He stood next to me and looked down at my display piece.

The poem I had chosen was:

"Perhaps he appeared in my dream because I fell asleep thinking of him. If I had known it was a dream, I would not have woken up."

I had created what was called a box flower arrangement, where the flowers were laid out in a box. I had used flowers that were light colors such as pink and white to give off the impression of a bed and dreams. I thought it was a perfect poem for me since Holmes had often been appearing in my dreams of late.

He continued to stare at my flowers, not saying a word.

"I think it turned out pretty cute, if I do say so myself," I said, laughing to cover up my embarrassment.

“This is unfair. It’s just too sweet,” he muttered. I looked up and saw that his face was bright red and he was covering his mouth with his hand.

“Unfair?” My eyes widened.

The club members, who had been watching us, all burst out into laughter and said:

“It’s okay, you can hug her.”

“Yeah, we’ll turn the other way.”

“Really, you can do whatever you want.”

“Thank you,” said Holmes. It didn’t seem like he had the slightest intention of holding back.

I stiffened. “No, you can’t. Not in a place like this. We can hold hands at most.” I took his hand in mine and realized it was ice cold. I looked up at him in shock. “Your hand is freezing.”

“Oh, I borrowed a scooter and rushed here from Fushimi. I was in such a hurry that I forgot to put on gloves.”

“Thank you for going to that much effort. It really does feel like ice...” I wrapped my hands around his cold hand and rubbed it, trying to warm it up.

“See, this is what I’m talking about. Could you stop doing these things?”

He seemed genuinely bothered, so I immediately let go and apologized.

“No, I didn’t mean I wanted you to stop *now*. Just...don’t do these things for any other guys, all right? You absolutely mustn’t.” He squeezed my hands again.

“Sure...”

“I should put my work away too,” Okubo spoke up. “Thanks so much, everyone. I can retire in peace now.”

We bowed and thanked her back, but all of us had sad expressions on our faces.

Meguro looked at Okubo’s work and winced in pain. “I’m sorry, Okubo. This is how you feel, isn’t it?”

The club president shook her head. “You don’t have to apologize. If anything, it should be me. I was jealous and told Kajiwarara that I couldn’t recommend you. I’m really sorry, and I wish you two happiness.” She offered a handshake.

Meguro bit her lip and took her hand with tears in her eyes. Okubo was still smiling, but I could tell that she was holding back tears of her own. It was too painful to watch, so I looked away.

“I see that Meguro still believes she and Okubo fell in love with the same person,” Holmes whispered.

I nodded in silence. Meguro thought that Okubo liked Haruhiko too...but the flowers probably revealed the truth. I looked at the light

purple misebaya flowers in Okubo's arrangement and recalled what Holmes had said last night.

"Aoi, this flower arrangement might hold another meaning."

"Huh?" I blinked.

"Misebaya flowers have another name that means 'string of jewels,' referring to a necklace. Don't you think that name fits this arrangement perfectly?"

I looked at Okubo's flowers again. They did look like a necklace, with the round flowers as jewels and the green stems connecting them as the string.

There was a love poem that began with a string of jewels:

"O string of jewels, if it shall end, then let it end. If it does not, I fear my endurance shall weaken."

The string of jewels was a metaphor for the thread of life, so the poem meant: "This life of mine, if it shall end, then let it end. If I continue to live any longer, I may not be able to keep hiding my love for you." It was a poem about enduring love, written by Princess Shokushi, the daughter of Emperor Go-Shirakawa.

A hidden love that must be kept secret no matter what...

Okubo had decided to distance herself from Meguro because Meguro had a boyfriend. That much was certain. It was also a fact that she was upset and wanted to prevent them from dating, which had resulted in her saying bad things about Meguro to Haruhiko. But the person Okubo was in love with wasn't Haruhiko.

I subtly looked over at Okubo, who had her hand on Meguro's shoulder. She smiled as if trying to comfort the girl.

A secret love that could never be revealed—because doing so would put the person she loved in a tough spot and hurt her feelings. It could result in their precious memories of the past being denied...but still, she chanted her love, hiding it behind the misebaya flowers.

"I can't stay by your side any longer, because I won't be able to keep hiding my love for you." Those were her secret feelings towards Meguro that she could never say aloud.

As I started to hang my head, Holmes tightened his grip on my hand.

After leaving the cafe, I walked hand in hand with Holmes down the shopping street to see him off since he was going back to Fushimi.

"Thank you so much for coming even though you were so busy," I said, looking up at him.

He shook his head and replied, "No, I came because I wanted to, and I'm glad I did. I was moved by your work." He placed a hand on his chest.

"Thank you. By the way, who did you borrow the scooter from?"

"It's Kota's."

"Kota... That reminds me, I heard from Haruhiko that Kota had a painful love in the past."

"A painful love?"

"Yes."

I recounted everything Haruhiko had told me about five years ago, when Kota had confessed that he'd fallen in love with someone he wasn't allowed to.

Holmes's response was simply, "I see..."

"I guess everyone's suffering from love, not just Okubo."

"Indeed, to the point where people today can still relate to poems written in the Heian period. Love has been swaying people's emotions in every direction since ancient times."

I gave a silent nod.

"The Ono no Komachi poem you chose made me really happy. It was like receiving a love letter. I think I'll be motivated to work harder for a while."

Hearing him bring the poem up again made me blush.

"Oh, I should give you a response poem while I'm here."

"Huh?" I looked up at him.

"There's one that perfectly matches how I'm feeling right now." He held an index finger up to his mouth and grinned mischievously.

13

After borrowing Kota's scooter to rush to Demachiyanagi during the evening break, Kiyotaka quickly returned to Fushimi.

"Thank you for lending me your scooter," he said, dropping by the break room.

Mizuki shook her head. "It's okay." She giggled. "You're like a real-life prince, rushing over during your short break for your girlfriend's sake."

"No, I didn't rush over for her sake. It was for my own sake."

Mizuki gaped, as did the other workers who had been listening to them while eating.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"For instance, let's say your favorite idol was holding an event in Demachiyanagi and you rushed there during the evening break because you thought you could make it in time. That would be for your sake, not the idol's, right? I desperately wanted to see Aoi's work, so I went there for me. Saying it was for her is like glorifying my actions, so it makes me feel bad." He really did seem a bit guilty, which made the others burst out laughing.

"You're an unusual guy, Yagashira. So, did you bring her a

bouquet of flowers?"

"No, I didn't have time for that. I could only give her a response poem."

"A what?"

"It was an event with flower arrangements matched to poems."

"Oh, I see. You really are unusual."

Suddenly, Takao came in holding a wooden box. "Kiyotaka!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You were right; the bottle really did come back. Thank goodness!" the overseer shouted excitedly, showing Kiyotaka the sake bottle in the box.

"That's great."

Ueno tilted his head. "What do you mean, the bottle came back?"

Takao flinched and waved his hand in dismissal. "Oh, it's nothing. It was only gone for a moment. Now that it's back, it's all fine."

Kanda put his teacup down on the table with a loud *clunk*. "That means someone stole it at one point, doesn't it? I don't think you can call that 'fine.' I don't like being kept under suspicion," he said with a stern face, in contrast to his usual quiet self.

"Huh? Does that mean the thief is one of us?" Ueno's eyes widened. "Am I being suspected too?"

"No, I never said that," Takao said in an attempt to calm the workers.

"Was this your doing, Yagashira?" Kanda asked, glaring at Kiyotaka.

"Huh? Me?" Kiyotaka pointed at himself, his eyes snapping wide open.

"Yes, you. You know the value of that bottle more than anyone else. You said it was worth eight hundred thousand, but it might be even more than that. You also said you wanted to buy it, didn't you?"

"I did say that."

"See, like I said. Who knows what you're thinking behind that smile? I always thought you were shady," he spat.

"Kanda, you're being too rude," Mizuki scolded him.

"It's fine," said Kiyotaka. "Sometimes there are people who can sense my dubiousness. Kanda is just one of them."

"What?" She blinked.

"Kanda, if I wanted that sake bottle, I wouldn't have appraised it as eight hundred thousand yen in the first place. I would say, 'This is fake. You'll be treated as a laughingstock if you keep it as a treasure. There are people who like this aesthetic even if it's a forgery, though, so could I have it?'—and it would have been mine. Even if that weren't the case, I wouldn't return it after successfully stealing it. Wouldn't it be better to lay the blame on the rest of you and feign

innocence? I'm 'the young master of the Yagashira family,' after all."

Kanda gulped and Ueno's face stiffened. "I feel like my impression of you as a nice young man has been shattered," said the latter.

"Who did it, then?" Kanda asked, irritated.

"It was me," said a voice behind them. Everyone turned around at once.

"Kota..." Mizuki's eyes widened in shock.

"I was pissed off at my father and stole it, but I put it back because I'd have a hard time selling it with Yagashira around," he said bluntly, putting his hand on his hip.

"Kota stole it?" Kanda had a look of utter disbelief on his face.

"I can't believe you'd do that just because you were mad at the overseer," Ueno protested.

"I overheard what he said here the other day, about giving the family heirloom to Mizuki's future husband," Kota replied with a blank expression.

"I was here when he said that. I wondered why he would give it to Mizuki's husband instead of the family heir," Ueno said hesitantly. Kanda seemed to agree with him.

Kiyotaka reached out and picked up the photo frame on top of the tea cabinet. "Doesn't this picture tell the whole story?"

"The picture?"

"Yes, I found this picture slightly strange. It was taken at a proper studio. Family photos like this are usually taken during winter or autumn events such as New Year's or the Shichi-Go-San festival, but in this one, the two children have short sleeves and their late mother is wearing summer colors."

"Couldn't it have been taken during the Bon festival?" asked Ueno.

"If so, it would be a little unnatural for Kota's grandparents to be absent since they were alive at the time. My guess is that this picture was taken when Takao and the woman in the kimono remarried. In other words, Kota was his late mother's child from a previous marriage."

Kota nodded. "That's right. I joined the Kotani family with my mother."

"What?" Kanda and Ueno looked at Kota in shock.

Kiyotaka shrugged. "I find it strange that you'd be so surprised. First of all, Kota is the only one in the family who doesn't speak with a Kyoto accent. Secondly, Mizuki calls her father 'dad' and her mother 'mother.' This is probably because Kota used 'mother' and she followed suit. Also, the name 'Kota Kotani' is repetitive, which made me wonder if he originally had a different surname."

"Yes, my mother's maiden name is Ishiguro, so I was originally

Kota Ishiguro. I may be a stepson, but I've worked hard to become the heir. And then my father said he was giving the sake bottle to Mizuki's husband instead of me, and it just rubbed me the wrong way."

Kanda and Ueno furrowed their brows.

"Wait, Ishiguro..."

"Is that the brewery we used to work at?"

"Yeah," answered Takao. "When Mizuki was only four years old, her mother ran away, saying that she couldn't stand working at a sake brewery anymore. Then my parents sent me to Ishiguro Brewery in Kanto to learn their techniques, so I left Mizuki in their care. While I was there, I fell in love with Kota's mother, who was a married woman, and we made a mistake."

Kanda and Ueno's jaws dropped.

"It was a disaster when we were discovered. She was divorced and escaped to my house with Kota. So...when she got sick and passed away, I thought it was my fault. I was a sinner who had stolen someone's wife. That's why, when I heard that Ishiguro had passed away from a sudden illness and the business had gone bankrupt, I reached out to the workers who had nowhere to go, hoping it would act as some form of atonement."

Kiyotaka nodded. He now understood the real reason Takao had said, "Everyone makes mistakes."

"My parents remarried too, so I can see where Kota is coming from, but I still can't believe that honest and kind guy would try something like that," Ueno said, his eyes moist with tears.

Kota averted his gaze.

Takao heaved a sigh and said, "Yeah. Kota is such a terrible liar."

"Huh?" Everyone frowned.

"Indeed he is," said Kiyotaka, nodding and looking straight at the overseer's son. "Kota, you didn't steal the sake bottle. You're covering for someone you care deeply for, aren't you?"

Kota's eyebrow twitched.

"And the person in question...is Mizuki, is it not?" Kiyotaka shifted his gaze to the overseer's daughter.

Mizuki nodded with a grim look on her face. "Yeah...I took the bottle."

"Why?" Takao asked gently.

"Kota told me, 'Father is thinking of giving that sake bottle to your future husband. Hurry up and find a good man to put him at ease.' When I heard that, I got so, so angry. Why would he pass over Kota, who worked so hard for Kotani Brewery, to give it to my husband? It doesn't make any sense. So when I was cleaning dad's room, I got curious and looked at the bottle. As I was looking at it, the anger gradually built up in me and I swiped at it with my hand...and it

broke.”

“I-It broke? Is this a fake, then?” Takao stared intently at the sake bottle.

“No, it’s the same one. Only one part of it was damaged. I was gonna pretend I didn’t know anything, but I heard it was really valuable, so I got scared. I snuck it to my room to fix it so that you wouldn’t be able to tell.” She guiltily hung her head.

“There was a tiny amount of powder in Takao’s room, indicating that something ceramic had been broken,” Kiyotaka added. “I assumed you broke it and were in the process of fixing it, since you said you were good at handicrafts.”

“So that’s why you muttered, ‘When it comes back, its value may have changed,’” Takao remarked. “This is an incredible repair job, though.” He stared at the bottle, impressed.

“Aren’t you mad?” asked Mizuki. “I ruined the value of our family treasure.”

“I never planned on selling it to begin with. That said, there’s something else I want to scold you about.”

“Something else?”

“Watching you two is frustrating me to death. That’s why I called in Kiyotaka. Thought I’d bring a handsome man into the mix to push things forward,” Takao said, glancing at the young man.

“So you knew,” said Kiyotaka.

“Well, yeah. Kota was repressing himself so much that it was painful to watch.”

“Huh?” Mizuki’s eyes widened.

“Kota, Mizuki, it appears that the overseer is aware of your feelings and approves of them. In fact, he might think Mizuki’s husband could be no one else.”

Kota silently put his hand over his mouth.

“What?” Mizuki said, flustered. “But Kota rejected me a long time ago. When I turned twenty, I confessed to him, ‘I’ve always loved you as a man,’ and he said, ‘Even if we’re not related by blood, we’re still siblings. Father would be sad.’ After that, he kept trying to marry me off. It was so annoying...” She lowered her eyes.

Takao looked at Kota, surprised. “Is that true, Kota? Did you reject her?”

Kota pressed a trembling hand against his forehead. “I mean, I had to, didn’t I? You called yourself a sinner, but to my mother and me, you were our savior.” He turned to the rest of us to explain. “My real father was a first-class tradesman, but the way he treated us was terrible. Cheating and violence were everyday occurrences. He made my mother work at the brewery in addition to doing the housework just because there are female brewers these days. Then the calm and

gentle Takao appeared, and as he defended her from my father, they naturally fell in love. When the affair was discovered, my father screamed that he was going to kill my mother, and Takao got on his hands and knees and said, 'It was my fault. Please kill me instead. You can beat me to death.' He protected us with his life. Others may call him a sinner, but we were truly grateful for him. After we came here, Takao—father—treated me like I was his real son, even after my mother passed away. Mizuki was his precious daughter, so I told myself, 'I can't. I'm her big brother.' Isn't it strange to begin with? Even though we're not related by blood, we grew up as siblings ever since we were young. How could I fall in love with my younger sister? It shouldn't be possible," he said, his voice growing hoarse.

Kiyotaka shook his head. "No, I don't think it's strange."

"Huh?"

"I'm sure you didn't see Mizuki as 'a younger sister' from the day you met her. To you, she was always 'an important girl to protect,' wasn't she?"

Kota widened his eyes, lost for words.

"Kota..." Mizuki looked at him with teary eyes.

"Kiyotaka's right," said Takao. "There's nothing wrong. You're a healthy couple and no one can criticize you. I kept waiting for you to make up your mind and tell me, but Kota's practically given up. My patience is wearing thin, so seriously, hurry up." He put his hands on his hips and shrugged.

"Indeed," Kiyotaka said with a smile. "Step-siblings can get married if they aren't blood-related. He might have to leave the family register first, though."

Mizuki turned bright red and put her hands over her mouth.

"Kota, I still—"

Kota immediately hugged her tightly and said, "Sorry, Mizuki. I've always felt the same way as you."

"Kota!" Mizuki buried her face in his chest and cried.

The others smiled at them and quietly left the scene. Even Kanda and Ueno, who had been interested in Mizuki, seemed to be fine with Kota being the one.

As they headed to the brewery, Kiyotaka glanced at Takao, who was walking next to him. "I certainly didn't think I'd been called here as a catalyst of sorts."

"Really? I'm glad you didn't notice. Your role was the rival in love."

"Rival in love... Wouldn't that only apply if both men were in love with the same woman?"

"Well, it all worked out." Takao grinned mischievously.

“So that’s what happened,” I said, astonished. Holmes had been telling me over the phone about the series of events that had occurred at Kotani Brewery.

“We were both caught up in incidents related to a secret love,” he said with a chuckle.

“You’re right.”

The couple at Kotani had kept their love hidden because they’d grown up as siblings. Okubo had been hiding her love for her best friend, who had been with her for a long time. Both cases were related to secret loves, but one of them came to fruition while the other remained hidden.

As I started to feel sad thinking about Okubo, Holmes said, “I’m sure she’ll be fine. As I said before, she must’ve made up her mind. Time heals all wounds, and everything comes down to fate. Okubo’s match will appear one day.”

“Okay.”

“Right, let’s go to Bar Konta together sometime. The new menu item I suggested is very popular.”

“Oh, I’d love to! You didn’t invite me, so I thought I wasn’t allowed to go.”

“That’s because I was worried about you coming late at night. I wouldn’t be able to ensure your safety on the way home, after all. When I’m finished training here, I’ll be able to go with you.”

Oh, so that’s why. My heart fluttered. “Thank you. What kind of food is it?”

“Deep-fried cheesecake.”

“What?” I squeaked.

“It’s surprisingly delicious and goes well with sake. It’s nice because it doesn’t feel too much like dessert.”

“I’m having a hard time believing that, but I do want to try it.” I laughed.

“Please do.”

“Oh right, thank you for the response poem too. It made me really happy.”

“Thank you too.”

The response poem that Holmes had chosen was by Fujiwara no Yoshitaka:

“I believed I would gladly give up my life for you, yet now that we are together, I wish to live as long as possible.”

Being united with the person you love could be considered a miracle. Even if your feelings do connect, a minor misunderstanding or quarrel could force your linked hands apart. Taking Fujiwara no

Yoshitaka's earnest wish to heart, I decided to cherish the miracle that had brought us together.

Short Story: Checking Answers

When Kiyotaka was nearing the end of his term at Kotani Brewery, the sake store received an unexpected visitor.

“Yagashira, an acquaintance of yours is here to see you,” said Mizuki, peeking inside the brewery.

Kiyotaka looked up from what he was doing. “An acquaintance?” For a second, he wondered if it was Aoi, but his hopes were dashed when he realized that Mizuki would’ve excitedly said, “Your girlfriend’s here!” if that were the case. Aoi had visited with his father before, so she would’ve been recognized.

“He looks kind of like a monk.”

“Oh.” Kiyotaka shrugged. *Ensho, no doubt. Why on earth is he here?* Thinking about the man made his forehead twitch. He straightened his back and went to the sake store.

“Hello, Mr. Holmes. Those work clothes and apron look good on you,” Ensho greeted him with a smile. As usual, his head was shaven and he was wearing a kimono. He was holding a paper bag with the Kotani Brewery logo on it. Presumably, he had just bought a bottle of sake.

“Thank you for the purchase,” Kiyotaka said reluctantly.

“Yanagihara heard you were training here and got a craving for this place’s sake since he hadn’t had it in a while. Figured I’d see your face while I was here.”

Mizuki came in and announced cheerfully, “Yagashira, Kota says you can start your break now. Since your friend’s here, go and take a walk with him.”

“Thanks, missy. Let’s go for a walk, my dear friend.” Ensho grinned.

Kiyotaka narrowed his eyes coldly but followed him outside the store. *Since he came all this way, there has to be something he wants to talk about.*

They walked leisurely through the town of sake breweries, soaking in the warm sunshine. As they approached the bridge overlooking the Hori River, Ensho murmured, “Oh, there’s a boat.”

“It’s the Jikkokubune boat cruise. It’s not running right now, but it’s nice during cherry blossom season.”

“I bet. This is a scenic place.”

“Yes, the cherry blossoms here are lovely. The yellow ones,

kizakura, are also nice.”

“Kizakura? That’s the name of a sake company, right?”

“The name comes from the president’s fondness for yellow cherry blossoms.”

“Are they really yellow?”

“Yes, although they have a white tinge to them. They’re more formally known as ‘ukon-zakura.’”

“Oh yeah?”

Kiyotaka suddenly felt the desire to see a painting of yellow cherry blossoms by Ensho, but he didn’t say it out loud.

They kept walking until they came across the Teradaya Inn, which was known for being the place where the shogunate attacked Ryoma Sakamoto during the Bakumatsu period.

“Teradaya, huh? Feels strange to think that such a historical event happened here,” Ensho said with a passionate sigh.

“Indeed, but it’s not just here. Kyoto is full of places like that.”

“Way to kill the mood.”

“I didn’t mean it that way. This is a wonderful place where lots of drama occurred, but it’s not the only one. Kyoto is steeped in history.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“More importantly, when are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“What did you need me for?” Kiyotaka crossed his arms and stared at Ensho.

“It’s nothing big. I just wanted to check if I had something right.”

“What?”

“The other day, I met your girlfriend.”

“Aoi?”

“Yeah, Aoi. At first I thought she was an immature little brat. I couldn’t understand why you’d chosen her. But each time I met her, she made me think, ‘Oh, so that’s why.’ She’s a pretty good woman, eh? You really are a connoisseur.”

Kiyotaka frowned in silence at Ensho’s attempt to poke fun at him.

“So I wondered why you wouldn’t lay a hand on her. At first I thought you were a coward when it came to women, but that ain’t it. I mean, you probably are a bit of one, but the root reason is something else. You’re scared of yourself, aren’t you?”

Kiyotaka narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

“I heard that even though you like antiques, you don’t have your own collection. That true?”

“Yes, it is.”

In the past, Aoi had once asked him if he wanted an antique for himself. It was shortly after she had begun working at Kura. He had shown her a piece of Yuan blue and white pottery and said that a

similar piece had gone for 3.2 billion yen at an overseas auction.

"Holmes, if you were rich, would you want this vase badly enough to pay a large sum for it?"

He shook his head. "No."

She looked at him in surprise. "Oh, really? But you love antiques, right?"

"Yes, I do. However, I don't have the desire to own them. I'm happy being able to see such wonderful pieces, and I want to see as many as I can during my life. To that end, I'm willing to go anywhere in the world. But I don't want to own them. I'm satisfied as long as I can look at them like this and store them in my heart and memory."

That had been his answer. *And I still feel that way*, he thought, placing a hand on his chest.

"You lose interest the moment you get something, right? That's why you're scared that if you get her, you'll fall out of love."

Kiyotaka froze.

"You're interested in a woman for once, and being infatuated with her makes you happy because it's like you're a normal person—but you're paranoid that your feelings will fade once you sleep with her. So you can't trust yourself. You're scared that it'll only be fun until the clothes come off; that after it's done, you'll wake up from the illusion of love and go, 'What, that was it?' Why don't you just admit it already? You ain't the kind of guy who falls in love in the first place. The proof is that you're purposely drawing out the fantasy right now, trying to get as much enjoyment as you can before making her yours."

"Shut up, will you?" Kiyotaka grabbed Ensho by the collar.

"See, I knew it. For someone who's so good at seeing through people, you sure hate being the one seen through. Well, I've got my answer. I feel refreshed now." Ensho grinned.

Kiyotaka clicked his tongue and let go of the man. "The concept of losing one's fixation upon obtaining something only applies to material things," he said, turning away.

It doesn't apply to the woman I fell in love with, he thought.

However, Aoi was the first woman he'd ever *truly* fallen in love with, so he honestly didn't know. Like Ensho said, he was using cowardice as an excuse, when in truth, he was afraid he couldn't trust himself. But one thing was sure: the reason he was so conflicted was because he didn't want to lose her.

"Oh, there's one more thing I wanted to ask."

"What is it?" Kiyotaka warily looked back at him.

"Don't look at me like that. Why did you choose this brewery? Didn't you have a lot of offers from other companies?"

Kiyotaka shifted his gaze to the bottle Ensho was holding. "My goal was what's in your hand."

“Sake?”

“Yes. I’ve always been a fan of Kotani’s sake, and with one month of training, I could make my own. I thought it would be nice to celebrate my girlfriend’s twentieth birthday with sake that I made myself,” he explained with a smile.

Ensho shrugged with a groan. “Well, hurry up and ‘obtain’ her so that you can get bored of her. Then I’ll be able to consider it.”

“Consider *what?*” Kiyotaka immediately glared at him.

“Yeesh, that’s a scary face. It was only a joke. I’m taking my leave. Thanks. Goodbye.” Ensho waved his hand nonchalantly and walked away.

“I really can’t stand that man,” Kiyotaka said with a light click of his tongue. *He mercilessly hones in on the things that I don’t want to acknowledge.*

He placed his hand on his forehead, sighed, and looked up at the afternoon sky. January was ending, and spring was still far away.

Chapter 2: A Vessel for Wealth and the Nature of Desire — The Day Kiyotaka Turned Thirteen

1

In February, having finished his term at the brewery, Kiyotaka returned to the Yagashira residence near Ginkaku-ji Temple. He was only making a quick visit since the owner had ordered him not to come back while he was in training—though he *had* been allowed temporary stays during the New Year holidays and to organize his things and clean the house.

He hadn't been home in about a month. He was worried that the house might've become a mess, but it wasn't as bad as he'd expected. It was actually rather clean, perhaps because the owner liked to keep things tidy and Yoshie came by often.

It's a stark contrast to my father's apartment in Yasaka, he thought with a strained laugh. The man lived by himself, so his place had been a disaster.

After sorting out his things and cleaning the living areas, Kiyotaka unlocked the door to the exhibition room and looked inside. It was a Renaissance-style parlor decorated with numerous works of art. This was where the Yagashira family's treasures were kept, and it hadn't been opened to the public since the owner's birthday.

He looked around, confirmed that nothing was out of the ordinary, and sighed in relief. He stopped in front of a painting on the wall.

"You really like that one, eh?" came the owner's voice from behind him.

"Yes." He nodded, not taking his eyes off it.

The owner stood beside him and grinned. "You must be attached to it since it was the first painting you ever bought."

"Yes..." *In many ways*, he thought.

* * *

It was his thirteenth birthday. It happened to be a weekend, so Kiyotaka was in his room at the Yagashira residence, lying in bed with a book. At around 11 a.m., the light on the intercom phone came on.

He reached over to the cabinet where the phone was and pressed the button without looking away from his book.

“Kiyotaka, the owner is calling for you,” came his father’s voice.

No one in this house called Seiji Yagashira “grandpa.” For as long as Kiyotaka could remember, his grandfather had been “the owner.” That said, his father—it gets confusing here, so he’ll be referred to as the manager—the manager addressed his own father, the owner, by “dad.”

“Okay,” Kiyotaka replied, getting out of bed.

He put the book on top of the pile of his other unfinished books and left the room, tidying his hair with his hands, then entered the living room to find the owner and manager sitting there along with the manager’s close friend, Ueda, who was practically considered a relative at this point.

“Happy birthday, Kiyotaka,” said the manager with a smile.

“Holmes is thirteen now, eh? Happy birthday,” Ueda added, grinning.

The boy bowed to them and said, “Thank you,” before turning to the owner, who was sitting on the sofa with his eyes closed and arms crossed.

“Kiyotaka, sit there,” the owner instructed.

Since it’s my birthday, is he going to lecture me about how I should behave in the future?

Feeling a little annoyed, Kiyotaka sat down in front of the owner as told. There was a silk wrapping cloth on the table between them.

Once he was sitting, the owner’s eyes snapped open. “You’re thirteen now.”

“Yes.”

“A long time ago, this age would’ve been considered an adult.”

Kiyotaka nodded. “You’re referring to the original coming-of-age ceremony, right?”

“There’s 1.1 million yen in here. It’s a birthday present for you since you’ve taken the first step on the road to adulthood.”

“What?!” exclaimed Ueda and the manager.

“Dad, he’s still a child.”

“Yeah, Owner. I don’t think you should be making this kid even weirder.”

Kiyotaka glanced at the two upset men and simply bowed to the owner. “Thank you,” he said nonchalantly.

“Aren’t you surprised?” the owner asked. “What do you think that money is?”

“Well, if it were a million yen, I’d think it was a coming-of-age gift and accept it as such, but 1.1 million is the maximum value that can be gifted without being taxed. That being the case, I assume that you

see me as a fellow adult now and are giving me this to reduce inheritance tax. You might be planning on doing this every year. Don't worry. I'll save it for the future and use it to run the store. Again, thank you." He bowed deeply.

"Ugh, you're always like this," the owner said with a shrug.

Ueda and the manager's jaws dropped.

"That's not it," the owner continued. "It's true that the number was because of the gift tax but *use* the money!"

"Even if you tell me to use it... Oh, do you want me to invest in stocks and increase my capital?"

"No. There's only one way to use it. You're gonna buy art, and I'm only giving you this weekend to do it."

Kiyotaka frowned, surprised by his words. "Only two days, and only 1.1 million?"

"*Only* 1.1 million?"

Ueda and the manager laughed awkwardly.

"It's a ridiculous amount of money for a middle school student's allowance, but it's not that much when it comes to buying art," the boy said flatly.

Ueda shrugged and the manager's face stiffened. "Well, the owner *does* bring him along for his purchases," said the latter with a chuckle.

"Buying art with 1.1 million..." Kiyotaka folded his arms. "Oh! Ueda, was it the owner who called you here? Not my father?"

"Yeah, he told me it was your birthday. I even brought a present." Ueda cheerfully took out a large wrapped box. "Happy birthday, Kiyotaka. It's a teddy bear from England."

"Thank you..." *The owner is treating me like an adult, but Ueda still thinks I'm a child*, he thought, slightly slumping his shoulders as he bowed.

"Seems like Kiyotaka has figured it out," said the owner. "I called Ueda here to supervise his shopping. Kiyotaka's still a kid in the eyes of society, so he can't buy expensive pieces of art himself. Ueda's used to that stuff, so he can handle it."

"I'll be glad to," said Ueda.

If Ueda is with me, I can even go abroad. Kiyotaka stroked his chin.

"Oh, and you're not allowed to take a plane or the shinkansen," said the owner, reading his mind and putting a quick stop to his plan. "Don't make Ueda accompany you that far. Here, let's add a restriction: you have to stay within the city."

"Within the city?" Kiyotaka facepalmed. *Another absurd requirement.*

* * *

"Man, what's going on in the owner's head?" Ueda wondered

aloud as he drove the car. "You're only thirteen, but he's giving you all this money and telling you to go buy art." He sighed.

"He's probably testing me," replied Kiyotaka.

"Testing you?"

"Yes, it's a test to see what I can buy with this money in a short amount of time. He wants to see if I have what it takes to become an appraiser and inherit the store," the boy in the passenger seat said calmly, perusing a list of antique stores and art galleries.

"Oh," Ueda murmured. He glanced at Kiyotaka, who had his legs crossed. "When did your legs get so long? How tall are you now?"

"One hundred and seventy-two centimeters."

"And you turned thirteen today. You're big for a first-year middle schooler."

"Not really."

Kiyotaka looked out the window and saw Tohka Saikan's flagship building on Shijo Street. It was a long-time Chinese restaurant located along the Kamo River and designed by William Merrell Vories. The building was reminiscent of Italian architecture, and he narrowed his eyes as he looked at it.

"A little while ago, I went to Europe with my grandfather. If he was going to test me, I wish he would've done it there."

"Yeah," said Ueda. He knew that the owner had gone to Florence and Paris during the winter break to buy things for a client. "Florence and Paris have great stuff."

"Yes, and there was something there that I wanted."

"An antique?"

"A painting of the city of Paris. It's sold in an antique store we often go to and I've always wanted it."

"If it's a Paris cityscape, was it painted by Maurice Utrillo?"

"No, it was a modern Japanese painter, although he passed away already."

"Oh," Ueda muttered as if he'd suddenly lost interest. "If you wanted it so badly, you should've just begged the owner for it."

"He's the kind of person who only buys things when necessary. He saw the painting and chose not to buy it, so there's nothing I can say to that," Kiyotaka said smoothly, looking down at the list.

Ueda shrugged in an "I don't know about that" manner. "You'd think getting that much money for your birthday would turn you into someone really selfish, but you're actually reasonable. I guess the owner's way is right."

"I don't know if it's right or not, but I've seen large transactions occur in front of me ever since I was little, so I can stay calm when it comes to money. That's why I didn't get excited about receiving so much, and I wouldn't panic if it were confiscated either."

“I see. You need to be immune to money or else you’ll let it sway you. It’s the owner’s style of gifted education,” said Ueda, muttering the last part under his breath. “Oh, we’re here.” He turned the steering wheel, pulling into the parking lot of the first antique store that Kiyotaka had specified.

* * *

That day, they went to antique shops and art galleries around the city and looked at all sorts of tea bowls, cups, saucers, jugs, vases, and paintings, but none of them were worth using the 1.1 million yen on. To make up for the disappointment, Ueda and the manager took Kiyotaka to Tohka Saikan to celebrate his birthday that night. Bird’s nest soup, braised shark fin, Peking duck, fried chili lobster, and other delicacies adorned the rotating tray on the table.

“What on earth is my father thinking, giving so much money to a child like Kiyotaka? I can’t believe this,” muttered the manager—a man of common sense—as he sipped his beer.

“It was bound to happen,” Ueda said as he ate his Peking duck.

“Why?”

“I thought it was crazy at first too, but I changed my mind after hearing Kiyotaka’s explanation. Now that he’s thirteen, the owner’s probably starting to train him as a real heir, turning him into a ‘vessel’ for receiving money.”

“A vessel?” The manager stared at Ueda, interested.

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka nonchalantly sipped his jasmine tea as if their conversation had nothing to do with him.

“Yeah, I’m a businessman so I get it. After I started this line of work, I learned that money needs a vessel. It’s like water—no matter how much money you have, if you don’t have a vessel, it’ll just flow away.”

Kiyotaka nodded in agreement.

“Without a vessel, water spills away, returns to the ground, rises to the sky as vapor, and then falls again on someone in the form of rain. In that sense, you might be right that money is similar,” said the manager.

“Right. Rain falls evenly on everyone, and it’s the size of your vessel that determines how much water you can secure from it. If you have a big one, you can get a lot of water and catch the occasional bout of heavy rain. But if you only have a small glass, you can only store that much. It’s the same with money. The amount of money someone can get depends on the size of their vessel.”

“That’s an easy-to-understand comparison,” the manager said with a smile.

“To make it even more obvious, think about the lottery. For

someone with a small vessel, winning the lottery is like a dam bursting. When a large amount of water you've never experienced before comes pouring down on you, a small vessel will break and the water will be gone before you know it. The owner's trying to make Kiyotaka into a big vessel that can hold any amount of water without panicking, and this is part of his education. In order to receive money, you gotta have a big vessel for wealth."

"I see. That's a very interesting description, and it makes sense to me. Now that you put it that way, you might be right. My father must be testing Kiyotaka to see how he'll spend the money."

"Yes," Kiyotaka agreed. "I think so too. So if I don't find a good piece of art within the time limit, I'm not going to force myself to buy something. Instead of wasting the money on something subpar, I'll return it right away and say, 'I didn't find anything good.'"

"Don't you think it'd be a wasted opportunity?" the manager asked with a serious expression.

Kiyotaka tilted his head. "Why would it be? Spending money on something that doesn't fascinate me would be the real waste. I don't want to pay a single penny for something mediocre. On the other hand, I'd be willing to pay any amount for something that moves my heart," he said without hesitation, taking a bite out of a dumpling. "This is so delicious."

Ueda and the manager looked at each other and said, "I think he's already educated enough."

* * *

The next day, they headed out at the time when antique shops in the city generally opened and looked around at various stores. Kyoto had many small streets that could barely fit a single car, and it was while making their way through these maze-like streets that Kiyotaka shouted, "Oh!"

"What's up?" Ueda asked, still focused on driving.

"There was an antique store around the corner on the street we just passed."

"Really? In a place like that?"

"I think it's probably new."

"Gotcha."

Ueda made a series of left turns to return to that street, and as Kiyotaka had said, there was a brand-new Scandinavian-style antique shop with striking white walls. It was called Kazamidori—"weather vane"—and true to its name, there was a black weather vane spinning around on the roof. They parked in the small lot and went inside.

The store had a stylish atmosphere that would appeal to modern youth. There were sofas, a clock, a chest of drawers, and some small

ornaments. The walls were lined with paintings by modern artists.

Ueda looked around and wondered, *Would a place like this have anything the owner would approve of?*

Meanwhile, Kiyotaka walked straight to the wall and stopped in front of a certain painting without looking at anything else.

“So you found this painting and wanted to come in, eh?” said Ueda, standing next to Kiyotaka and gazing at it. It was an oil painting of the Paris cityscape. The colors were vivid and the whole painting felt full of life.

Kiyotaka didn’t move from that spot.

“You like this painting?” Ueda asked.

“Yes.” The boy nodded, not taking his eyes off of it. “I’m surprised to see it here. This is the one I saw in the antique store in Paris.” He had a calm expression on his face, but the passion in his voice made it clear that he was excited.

Ueda smirked slightly and said, “The owner of this store must’ve bought it.” He then looked at the name of the artist: “Yukio Kodama (1916 — 1992).”

How much is it? he wondered.

“Welcome,” came a man’s voice from behind them. “Do you like it?”

Kiyotaka and Ueda turned around and exclaimed, “Oh!” at the same time. It was Kazami, the man who had tried to sell Ueda a forged Léonard Foujita painting at his divorce party.

“Oh, Ueda,” the man said, flustered.

“Kazami, don’t tell me you’re—” *Selling counterfeits again*, Ueda was about to say.

“All of the paintings here are very nice,” Kiyotaka said, swiftly interrupting him.

Ueda shut his mouth. Based on those words, the paintings must have been legitimate.

“So your name is Kazami,” the boy continued, turning around with a grin. “Long time no see.”

“Oh...you’re that kid? You’ve grown a lot in such a short amount of time.” Kazami eyed Kiyotaka from head to toe, his face tense. Then he looked at Ueda and bowed with a bitter expression. “Ueda, I’m really sorry for what I did. I lost the trust of a lot of friends because of that, and I’ve reflected on my actions. I’m running an honest business now...”

“If you’re not doing that stuff anymore, then that’s fine. I still like that painting I bought from you for thirty thousand, enough to keep it hanging in my office.”

“I see,” said Kazami, smiling in relief.

“Excuse me,” said Kiyotaka after confirming that their

conversation had ended. "Would you be willing to sell this painting for eight hundred thousand yen?"

Kazami's eyes widened. "You must be joking, little Yagashira. This painting is worth 1.5 million."

"You bought this from an antique store in Paris, didn't you? It was sold there for six hundred thousand."

The store owner shrugged. "Well, I thought it was worth 1.5 million. That's why I bought it."

"You have a good eye, so it's really such a shame..." Kiyotaka chuckled.

Kazami's eyebrow twitched. "What do you mean by that?"

The boy turned around to look at an inconspicuous painting in the corner of the store. "Kazami, how much are you selling that piece for?"

"That one's fifty thousand. It's by an up-and-coming artist who isn't well-known yet, but I bought it because I thought it was pretty good."

"Amazing. You really do have a good eye. I think you could display it more prominently and add a zero to the price."

"What?" Kazami laughed.

"This artist held a solo exhibition in New York just the other day. There, a world-famous soccer player liked one of his paintings and bought it. I heard that the artist was overjoyed and promised to make a better frame for it and deliver it to him. It should arrive soon, so it's only a matter of time before the news spreads."

"What did you say?" Kazami and Ueda's eyes widened.

"As I'm sure you already know, in this industry, no matter how talented someone is, they need to be noticed or else they'll get buried. But once they get noticed and become popular, the price of their work soars. This artist was already incredibly talented, so if a world-famous person takes a liking to him, he'll quickly become a big name."

Kazami's face instantly went pale and he put his hand on his forehead.

"In exchange for this information, could you sell Yukio Kodama's painting to me for eight hundred thousand?" Kiyotaka pressed him.

"I don't think the information is worth that much. But the art industry is a small world, and I suppose the better we get along, the faster I'll be able to get good information." He glanced at Ueda and furrowed his brow, thinking it might be in his best interest to concede this time. "How about 1.3 million?"

"I'll offer you a nice one million, on the condition that I give you good information as soon as it reaches me for the next five years," the boy responded immediately.

Kazami sighed and looked up at the ceiling. "What are you so

drawn to in this painting? I mean, I thought it was good too, otherwise I wouldn't have bought it, but you're from the Yagashira family. You must've seen a lot of art in your life, right?"

Ueda nodded in agreement. "I was thinking the same thing. It's a beautiful Paris cityscape with vivid colors and it'd make a great interior piece, but what's got you charmed to the point where you'd go this far?"

Kiyotaka gazed at the painting and squinted as if he was looking at something dazzling. "It's about emotional agreement."

"Huh?" Ueda frowned.

"The first time I went to Paris was three years ago, when I was ten. That was when I came across this painting at the antique store. At the time, I was moved and excited by the city of Paris, and this painting synchronized perfectly with my heart. I can't stop my heart from beating faster when I see it. I fell in love with this artist's depiction of the city."

Kazami crossed his arms. "You fell in love, huh? That's nice. By the way, I hear that as the grandson of nationally certified appraiser Seiji Yagashira, you're going to be his heir. Are you going to become an appraiser in the future?"

"That's the plan."

"In that case, I have a question for the future renowned appraiser. There's a mystery in my heart that I haven't been able to solve for years. Depending on your answer, I'll let you have the painting for one million."

Kiyotaka nodded with a serious look in his eyes. "Okay. What's your unsolvable mystery?"

"Well, it's a mystery to humankind, not just me. Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*... Who do you think it depicts?" Kazami asked, looking straight at the boy.

It was said that the *Mona Lisa* contained many mysteries. One theory stated that it was a commissioned painting of Francesco del Giocondo's wife, Lisa. Others believed the subject could be the Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalene.

"I think the people around the world have the right answer."

"What?" Kazami frowned skeptically.

"I think da Vinci painted a mystery."

"A mystery?"

"Yes. On the surface, it's definitely a portrait of Giocondo's wife, Lisa. But it was purposely created in a way that would make people think, 'Is this really Lisa?'"

"What do you mean?"

"Da Vinci became an apprentice at Andrea del Verrocchio's workshop at the age of fourteen. It's speculated that Sandro Botticelli,

who would've been a young man at the time, was also there. Da Vinci, who was about as young as I am, probably couldn't help but be conscious of the incredibly talented Botticelli. Botticelli's works were deep. For example, his *Story of Susanna* combines scenes that take place at different times in a single painting, from the time when she is threatened up until the time when she escapes execution. As you can see in that painting, Botticelli has a way of depicting multiple stories and mysteries in a single piece. His works are difficult to understand at first glance, and some of them may even contain mysteries that go unnoticed by normal people like me. However, I believe that da Vinci, who had the same senses as him, would've been fascinated and inspired by Botticelli's mysteries, to the point of jealousy."

"Da Vinci was jealous?" Kazami laughed as if the thought were preposterous.

"If you think of da Vinci as a god, then you won't be able to see certain things. Even though he was extraordinarily talented, he was still human," Kiyotaka replied before continuing his story. "One of the unique characteristics of da Vinci's paintings is the fingers, which will be pointing towards something—for example, the heavens. There's a theory that they point to God or Jesus. If we assume this is true, where do you think the *Mona Lisa*'s fingers are pointing?"

"They aren't pointing anywhere in that paint—" Kazami's eyes widened as he recalled the *Mona Lisa*, whose hands were wrapped protectively around her abdomen.

"On the surface, it's a painting of Giocondo's wife, but he added a mystery to it by hiding an image of the Virgin Mary carrying the Son of God in her womb behind her. That way, the painting could be interpreted in two different ways. In short, my opinion is that he purposely painted a mystery," Kiyotaka said with a smile.

Kazami folded his arms. "Let me ask you one more thing. I'm sure you know the story that there were three paintings da Vinci never handed over in his life: the *Mona Lisa*, *The Virgin and Child with Saint Anne*, and *Saint John the Baptist*. What's your take on that?"

"I think it's because they were unfinished."

"Unfinished?"

"My guess is that da Vinci wanted to use those three paintings to create a large-scale mystery, like the ones he noticed in Botticelli's paintings. He wanted other people with the same senses to notice his mystery and admire him the same way. He was trying to use those paintings to create an amazing enigma, but he couldn't complete it. If he had, then perhaps he would've let go of the paintings. I think he continued to hold on to them because they were unfinished."

Kazami nodded. "Interesting. If da Vinci was painting a mystery itself, then of course we wouldn't be able to solve it. Because the

mystery is unsolvable, mankind continues to be fascinated by that painting. And because it was unfinished, he didn't let go of it..." he muttered to himself.

Ueda nudged him with his elbow. "Hey, Kazami. This is just a thirteen-year-old boy's theory."

"I know that." He looked at Kiyotaka. "Only thirteen, huh? I'm scared for the future," he murmured quietly. "All right. I'll sell the painting for one million."

"Thank you."

"Oh, so you caved in too," quipped Ueda. "The Little Holmes of Kyoto is amazing, eh?" He cheerfully put a hand on Kiyotaka's shoulder.

"Holmes?" Kazami tilted his head.

Kiyotaka shrugged. "He gave me that nickname because my last name is Yagashira..."

"I see. But I don't think you're a 'little' Holmes. You're almost an adult. I conceded this time because I thought it'd be much more advantageous for me to have your gratitude, Holmes of Kyoto."

After a pause, Kiyotaka said, "Thank you," bowed deeply, and accepted the painting.

2

Kiyotaka gazed at the Yukio Kodama painting hanging on the wall of the Yagashira exhibition room, fondly remembering the story behind it. That day, when he had taken the painting home and showed it to the owner, the appraiser had simply smiled and nodded, saying, "I see." The fact that he had smiled meant that it hadn't been a bad choice. Kiyotaka had explained that he had purchased it for one million and would be saving the remaining hundred thousand, to which the owner had laughed and said, "Of course you will."

The owner had probably known that an antique shop in Kyoto had purchased this painting. Having seen his grandson's eyes light up in front of it every time they went to Paris, he must have wanted to let the boy buy it for himself. And of course, he wasn't going to make it easy.

"I heard when you bought this painting, you gave Kazami your opinion on the *Mona Lisa*," said the owner. "Why didn't you do that last time?"

"Last time?" Kiyotaka tilted his head and looked at him.

"At Aoi's birthday party, when Ueda brought the *Mona Lisa* poster. Didn't he want you to tell her that story?"

"Oh. Yes, probably. I didn't want to share my personal opinion, though. Fortunately, Ueda was perceptive enough to realize that

immediately, so he backed down without forcing me to say it.”

“Why didn’t you want to tell her?”

“I don’t want my personal theory to be thought of as the truth. How someone feels when they look at da Vinci’s paintings is up to them. I want people to value what they feel, and I think that’s da Vinci’s gift to each and every person who views his work.”

The owner nodded, impressed, and looked back at the painting. “Despite that, you enticed Kazami with your theory. You must’ve really wanted this painting, eh?”

“It’s not like Kazami thinks my theory is right to begin with. I’m sure he only accepted it because he thought it was interesting coming from a thirteen-year-old.”

“I guess.” The owner shrugged. “I was surprised when you put this painting here instead of in your room,” he said with a nostalgic air.

“It...looks better here.” Kiyotaka didn’t explain further.

In truth, there was more to the story. Having acquired the painting, Kiyotaka had eagerly taken it to his room and unpackaged it. But the moment he laid eyes on it, he was shocked. Even though the painting’s brilliance had not changed, his excitement had vanished. It was an inexplicable feeling of loss. By obtaining the painting, he had lost his special feeling of love for it.

Bewildered by the change within himself, he thought, *Maybe it’s only this painting*. He tested it several more times, obtaining things he truly wanted—but the result was always the same. The moment he obtained something, his passion for it disappeared. He realized it would be better for things to stay in his grandfather’s or Kura’s possession so that he could keep that “special feeling” forever. He began to think, “I don’t want to own what I truly want.” He no longer wanted to experience the feeling of something that seemed so bright fading away in an instant, of the excitement in his heart vanishing into thin air.

Indeed, on that day when he was thirteen, he had realized his true nature. Until now, nobody had been able to see through that side of him—except for one person.

Kiyotaka gritted his teeth, the image of Ensho flashing through his mind. As the detestable man had said, this was the reason he couldn’t progress his relationship with Aoi.

“The concept of losing one’s fixation upon obtaining something only applies to material things.”

He had argued that it didn’t apply to people, but in all honesty, he didn’t know. Even though he had had relationships with women before, he had never felt strongly about them. Aoi was the first person he had ever been deeply in love with to the point of swinging between

joy and anxiety. What would happen to him if he made her his? If his feelings grew stronger, that would be the happiest thing. But what if those feelings vanished too? The thought gave him chills.

“Kiyotaka, where are you going next?” asked the owner, bringing him back to reality.

“I’m going to Tokyo tomorrow to start working as a cram school instructor.”

The owner laughed. “That’s perfect.”

“I hope so. Anyway, I’ll be leaving now. Please lock the door when you’re done here.”

Kiyotaka bowed to the owner and left. The painting of the Paris cityscape, when hung in the exhibition room, shone just as brightly as it had back then.

Short Story: Kaori Miyashita's Love Life

“What do you think about going out with me, Kaori?” asked Keigo Kohinata, medical research grad student and former schoolmate of Kiyotaka Yagashira. He put his coffee cup down and smiled, his eyes narrowing behind his glasses. His casual tone of voice was probably on purpose due to nervousness. As proof, he was scratching his head to hide the fact that his ears were bright red, since his hair was too short to cover them.

Looking at him, Kaori Miyashita thought, *Yeah, he isn't a bad person.*

They were on the second floor of a world-famous cafe near Teramachi-Sanjo. Kohinata had asked her on a date, and when he'd inquired if there was anywhere she wanted to go, she had said she wanted to see a movie. That was a good choice for going out with someone she didn't know well. It let her immerse herself in her own world, it took up a lot of time, and afterwards, they'd have something to talk about. It just so happened that there was a movie she had wanted to see too. Normally, she didn't mind going alone, but this one was a horror film. Her best friend, Aoi, had declined her invitation, saying that she wasn't brave enough to watch something like that on the big screen.

“When you said you wanted to watch a movie, I thought it'd be one of the popular romance ones. I wasn't expecting horror, but it's just like you to suggest that,” Kohinata had said with a laugh.

Kaori wondered what he meant by that. At the start of the year, they'd had dinner with Aoi and Holmes. After that, they had swapped contact information and began exchanging messages. Their conversations had been nothing more than small talk about what was going on around them, so Kaori doubted he knew her well enough to say that something was “just like her” to do.

Today, they had watched a movie at the Sanjo theater before deciding to have tea at a nearby cafe. Their idle chatter had continued for a while, and when the conversation died down, those words came out of his mouth.

“Going out with you...” Kaori put down her cup and hummed.

“You have a really grim look on your face.”

“Oh, pardon me. I was thinking about it.”

“About what it’d be like?”

“That, and I was wondering why you wanted to go out with me in the first place.”

Kohinata’s eyes snapped wide open. “Huh? It’s because I think it’d be nice, of course.”

“That’s what I don’t get. I’m not sociable, I can’t say clever things, and I’m kind of a fangirl and a geek. I don’t think I’m that appealing as a girl. The people around me are way more feminine, like my sister and Aoi. Like, even as a fellow girl, they make me feel like I want to protect them. And Aoi wanted to make a necktie for Holmes since his birthday’s coming up, so she went to the trouble of asking a sewing club to teach her. It’s crazy how hard she can work for her boyfriend’s sake. I don’t have that in me at all,” she said with a serious face.

Kohinata burst out laughing.

“Is this really the time to be laughing?” Kaori asked.

“Sorry, I just thought it was funny because that’s what I like about you.”

“What?” She looked down, her cheeks suddenly feeling hot. “You have bad taste, huh?”

“Really? There are an infinite number of tastes people can have, so I wouldn’t think of mine as bad.”

Kaori fell silent.

“You know, I have three older sisters,” he continued.

“Three?”

“Yeah. It’s embarrassing to say this about my own family, but all three of them are attractive and popular in their own ways. But I’ve seen how they keep up appearances while being terrible when no one’s looking, so for as long as I can remember, I’ve had a slight distrust of women.”

“I think I know how you feel,” Kaori said with a laugh.

“Right? That’s why I’m relieved that you’re always your natural self. I figure you must be the same way whether you’re at home or outside.”

Kaori felt like she could accept that reasoning.

“I hope you understand where I’m coming from a little better now,” he continued. “Will you consider it?”

“At first, I thought you were just pulling my leg...but I think I kind of understand now that you aren’t.”

“Only ‘kind of?’” He shrugged.

“I understand, but I don’t have any special feelings for you yet.”

“When you say ‘yet,’ that means there’s a chance you will in the future, doesn’t it?”

Kaori smiled awkwardly and looked down. Even as she said these things, she couldn’t help but think about the manager.

“Is there someone else you like?” Kohinata asked.

She blushed and averted her gaze. “I’m not sure, but it might be love.” Her hands on the table trembled as she spoke.

“Someone at your university?”

She shook her head. “He’s a lot older than me, so I’m not even in the running.”

“Hey, you never know.” He rested his chin on his hand with a smile, but it clearly wasn’t a sincere one.

“He’s not someone I *should* be falling in love with in the first place.”

“Is he already married?” he asked, his tone of voice dropping.

Kaori quickly looked up and said, “No, it’s not something like that.”

Kohinata leaned back and sighed. “I don’t know if I’m relieved or disappointed.”

“Huh?”

“Because if you were in love with a married man, I could openly object. You said it ‘might’ be love, but it totally is. It’s written all over your face.”

“It is?!” Kaori put her hands on her cheeks.

“Yeah, you were making a really cute face that said ‘I love that person.’” He laughed mischievously and then heaved a sigh. “Too bad.”

She couldn’t say anything in response to that.

“So what are you going to do?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you going to keep doing nothing because he’s a lot older and wouldn’t see you that way?”

Kaori weakly looked away.

“You might be surprised to hear this, but it took a lot of courage for me to ask for your contact info and invite you on a date, you know?” he added.

She looked up, startled. It *was* surprising. She hadn’t thought of him as a playboy, but he did seem to have a lot of female friends. She had assumed that asking girls out was an everyday thing for him.

“Okay, you don’t have to look *that* surprised.”

“You seem like you’re used to asking girls out, so I thought it’d be easy for you.”

“Well, it’s easy to ask out a girl I don’t really care for, but if it’s someone I want to date, it takes courage. I don’t think men and women are very different when it comes to that.”

Kaori nodded.

“So, if you’re willing to respect my courage, I want to ask you to be brave too, Kaori,” he said with a smile.

She gulped and lowered her gaze.

Seeing her fall silent, Kohinata panicked and said, "Oh, but this is just a selfish request from me. Don't feel pressured, all right?"

"I know." She nodded and brushed her bangs out of her face.

Suddenly, she noticed a poster on the wall that said "Limited-time Valentine's Day Menu: Chocolate Drink."

"I think I'll do something about my feelings," she said with resolve.

Kohinata looked at the poster too. "Oh right, it's almost Valentine's Day."

"Yeah. It's Holmes's birthday too."

"Wait, really? Yagashira's birthday is on Valentine's Day?"

Kaori burst out laughing. "What, you didn't know?"

"Well, yeah. Guys don't ask each other what their birthdays are, and besides, that guy doesn't talk about himself unless you ask."

"Oh, that's right."

"I'm pretty good at seeing through people, but Yagashira is truly mysterious. I could never tell what he was thinking. I thought he'd never open up to anyone, let alone get a girlfriend and turn into *that...*" Kohinata covered his mouth as he burst out laughing, probably recalling the scene at Shokado Garden Art Museum when Holmes had come running to see Aoi.

"Yeah, I know exactly how you feel." Kaori nodded and laughed with him, then looked at the poster again.

I'll face my feelings, and when I have my answer, I'll go and give him chocolate on Valentine's Day.

She wrapped her hands around her cup and squeezed it tightly.

Chapter 3: Revenge Live on Stage

Early March, in the backroom of an outdoor stage at a theme park in Osaka Prefecture.

“Today, all of your inhumane deeds will be exposed to the public. You have given everything to entertainment, and you shall disappear in entertainment.”

These words, scrawled on the script in bright red, marked the beginning of the revenge show. However, the plot took on a very different form due to the presence of Kiyotaka “Holmes” Yagashira.

The story goes back to a little while ago...

1

The antique store Kura was enveloped in a faint, gentle fragrance. I looked at the lovely peach blossoms decorating the interior and smiled.

It was March. Last month had held two major events for me: the Flower, Poetry, and Matcha Cafe in the Demachiyana Masugata shopping street, followed by Valentine’s Day, which was also Holmes’s birthday.

Holmes’s birthday was so much fun, I thought as I cleaned the store, fondly remembering that day.

This year, after vowing to enrich his personal life while working on his training, Holmes took time off to come back to Kyoto for a day trip on his birthday. Thanks to that, we would be able to have an all-day date.

I had two plans in mind for his birthday. First, I decided that I would be leading the way, since he always did it for me. Second, I wanted to do something that would surprise even someone as carefree as him.

On February 14th, the day of our date, I told Holmes in advance to dress warmly and *not* come by car. I then drove my father’s car to our meeting spot by myself. I had actually gotten my driver’s license the year before in between school and work, and for the sake of this plan, I had kept that a secret from Holmes. The look of surprise on his face when he saw me arrive by car was priceless.

“Aoi, you got a driver’s license?” he squeaked, eyes wide in shock.

“Yes, I did,” I replied nonchalantly. Then, I opened the passenger

door for him, as he had always done for me. "Please get in. I'll be driving today."

"Thanks. I really can't believe this is happening."

After sitting down, Holmes continuously offered to take my place, but I refused to hand over the wheel.

"I can't relax when I'm in the passenger seat," he insisted. "Are you sure you're okay? Please be careful. Oh, I wish this seat had a brake too. But no matter what happens, I'm with you, so at least I can die happy."

I didn't know whether to be offended or pleased, but at any rate, I drove to Sagano first. There, we got on a sightseeing train. Holmes had said before that he'd never gone down the Hozu River, much to my surprise, so that was the plan for today.

"Oh, so this is why you said to dress warmly." He nodded in understanding with a happy smile on his face.

"Yes. I'm sure this place is best during the fall or cherry blossom season, but I'm glad the weather is at least nice."

Luckily, it was warm and sunny, almost as if it were spring. Also, heated boats were used in the winter, so we were able to enjoy the ninety-minute ride without worrying about the cold.

Even though it was Holmes's first time on the boat, he knew everything about the area. During the ride, he told me about the Koayu Rapids and the Ukai Beach, where Emperor Seiwa of the Heian period enjoyed cormorant fishing during his recovery from illness. It was funny to see the other passengers listening in too, and it made me realize that Holmes really was Holmes, no matter where he went.

After the Hozu River cruise, we ate lunch in Arashiyama and I gave him his birthday present and Valentine's Day chocolate. The present was a handmade necktie, since he was training to be a full-fledged working adult. I had bought good-quality fabric, asked a classmate in the sewing club for help, and joined the club's sessions several times to practice.

"I'm so happy," he said. "I never expected you to sew a tie for me. Today has been full of surprises from you."

"I'm glad. You're always bringing me to places, so I really wanted to be the one doing it today, and I wanted to surprise you on top of that." I handed him the wrapped box.

"I'm really no match for you," he said, placing a hand on his forehead.

After lunch, we went on a date in West Kyoto. We visited Oharano Shrine, which was also called Kyo-Kasuga because it was the first branch of Kasuga Grand Shrine in Nara. Shikibu Murasaki was said to be one of its patrons, and its stone deer guardians were adorable.

The last stop on our tour was Yoshimine-dera Temple. Since it was

located on a hill, we could look out over the city of Kyoto. It reminded me of the views Holmes and I had shared at Ginkaku-ji Temple and Kiyomizu-dera Temple. I had always seen Kyoto from the east side, so seeing it from the opposite direction was a refreshing change, and the view was incredible. It was truly impressive how Kyoto had wonderful shrines and temples everywhere you went, whether that be east, west, north, or south.

At night, Holmes insisted on thanking me, so I let him treat me to dinner at the Hotel Granvia connected to Kyoto Station. After that, I saw him off at the ticket gate before he went back to Tokyo.

“It really was so much fun.”

The mission had been a success, making for an extremely satisfying day. I’d thought I’d be fine even if I couldn’t see him again for a while, but these days without him were even lonelier than before.

I looked at the calendar. *It’s almost been a year since he began his training.* His birthday had been so fun that it made the normal days harder to endure. *We used to spend all of our time together in this store. Thinking about it, we sure had it easy back then.*

Suddenly, the door chime rang.

“Welcome,” I said, putting on a smile and facing the entrance. Standing there was a flashy young man who seemed out of place in this old-fashioned store.

“Heya, Aoi. I’m here bringing you one of the most handsome men in the world.”

It was Akihito.

“Welcome, Akihito.”

When we first met Akihito Kajiwara, he was an up-and-coming actor, and now he was quite famous. He’d always been attractive, but his appearance seemed even more refined now.

It had been quite some time since he had last visited Kura. He walked straight through the store and sat down across the counter from me without hesitation.

“It’s been a while,” I remarked.

“Yeah, we haven’t seen each other since the New Year’s party.”

“When did you come back to Kyoto?”

“Just now. I have a meeting in Osaka in the evening, and I dropped by here thinking Holmes might be in.”

“Holmes is in Tokyo right now.”

I went to the kitchenette to make coffee.

“Wait, he is?” came Akihito’s disappointed voice from behind me.

I couldn’t help but laugh. Akihito lived in Tokyo, as was common for people in the entertainment industry. He had a lot of work in the

Kansai region, though, so he often came back to Kyoto and stayed in his family-owned apartment in Karasuma-Shijo by himself. He must've been upset that Holmes, his self-proclaimed "best friend," had gone to Tokyo—the place he primarily lived and worked—without telling him.

"You really love Holmes, huh?" I said, giggling as I brewed the coffee.

Akihito pouted. "That's not true. I just had a small favor to ask him."

"What is it?"

"Well, I guess you could call it a work consultation. But if he's in Tokyo right now, it's not gonna be possible anyway." He sighed.

"Oh, but he should be coming back soon."

"Wait, really?"

"Yes. He's working as a short-term cram school teacher this time. At first, they wanted to extend his term, but recently they've been telling him, 'It might be dangerous for you to be a teacher.'"

I placed the coffee cups on the counter.

Akihito frowned. "Why is it dangerous? Is he seducing the female students?"

"No, all of the students are middle school boys. Apparently, they all became his devout followers."

"Followers..." His eyes widened.

It was easy to imagine. Just recently, when Holmes had been working at Shokado Garden Art Museum, a middle school boy who had come as a volunteer had also admired him like a follower.

"So they all became like Rikyu, then. Maybe he's got something that appeals to boys going through puberty. Yeah, that's dangerous for a teacher. If he's not careful, he'll end up brainwashing them. Scary stuff," Akihito said with a laugh.

Aren't you one of those brainwashed people? I wondered, but I refrained from saying it out loud.

"I can pass on a message for you if you want," I offered.

He mulled over it as he drank his coffee. "Nah, I don't know what's going to happen with this project, so I think I'll wait until it's decided."

I was curious about the project, but it didn't seem like he wanted to talk about it, so I didn't press him. I sipped my coffee too and said, "Oh, right, your TV drama is really popular, huh?"

"Yep, thanks."

Akihito had been starring in a TV drama since last fall: a prime-time "ranger" show that aired in thirty-minute episodes at 6:30 p.m. The rangers had been acting out various themes over the generations, and this time the theme was "local."

Akihito played an ordinary young man who was told that he was

“Blue,” a warrior with the special power to protect the Kanto region. Blue was instructed to search for his comrades all over the country, so he went everywhere from Hokkaido to Okinawa. Just like him, none of the people he found could believe they had the soul of a warrior. He gathered allies by passionately persuading them to join him. *“I couldn’t believe it at first either. But we’re special! I’m Blue, the protector of Kanto, and you’re Green, the protector of Tohoku!”*

Unlike standard ranger shows, the central color was Blue, not Red. Apparently, Red had been assigned to the Chugoku region, which had yet to appear in the show since it was known for a certain baseball team that had red as its main color. This thirty-minute drama, which had been nicknamed *Local Rangers*, had everything: the typical plot developments, beautiful male actors, tear-jerking moments, comedy, battles, sightseeing information, and local delicacies. It garnered a much greater response than the production team had anticipated, immediately capturing the hearts of parents and children from their living rooms.

Akihito had already been rising in popularity beforehand, so after this show, he reached the status of “well-known popular actor.” A second season had been announced for this year as well. Even Holmes seemed to be watching it every now and then. “It brings out Akihito’s good qualities,” he’d said.

“I really liked the episode in the Hokkaido arc when White joined them. The scene where you got on a bale of hay to persuade him suited you way too well.”

“Oh, that one. I said I wanted to try getting on one, so they made the scene into that. The staff are really open to ideas.”

“A lot of people were talking about it.”

Apparently, there was a farm in Hokkaido where you could get on a bale of hay like Blue did and take a picture.

“Yeah, I heard the local area set up a promotion for confessing your love or proposing marriage on top of a hay bale.”

“A proposal on top of a hay bale...”

It’s nice that the show sparked activity in the region, but what would it feel like to be proposed to like that?

I suddenly imagined Holmes proposing to me from on top of a bale of hay. Dressed in a black tuxedo, carrying a red rose, holding his hand out to me, and saying, “Aoi, please marry me!” Somehow...it seemed like he’d still manage to look good. In fact, being proposed to would make me happy no matter where it took place, so I couldn’t help but blush at the thought.

Wait, calm down, Aoi. It’s still a bale of hay. I facepalmed. Being in a long-distance relationship was making my fantasies run wild.

“What’s wrong, Aoi? Your face went red and then pale.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. You’ve really become a star since *Local Rangers* did so well, huh?” I laughed, trying to hide my distress.

It was impressive, though, when I thought back to when we first met. At the time, he had been an obscure actor with only minor roles to his name, just starting to get some work in stage plays.

I thought he was going to respond enthusiastically with something like, “Yeah, I’m a superstar at this point,” but surprisingly, he didn’t say anything. In fact, he looked a bit uncomfortable.

“Akihito, is something wrong?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing. I’m fine. Anyway, I think I should get going,” he said, downing the rest of his coffee in a single gulp.

“But you just got here.”

“Look, if Holmes finds out I was alone with you in a closed space, I’m a dead man.”

He laughed teasingly, and I couldn’t help but laugh too.

“This is a store, so there’s nothing wrong with it. Sometimes I’m alone in here with the manager or Ueda, and nothing’s happened to them.”

“Yeah, but I’m one of the best-looking guys out there.” It was a bit of a relief to see him back to his usual banter. “Anyway, let me know when Holmes is back.”

“Okay. Good luck with your work.”

“Thanks.”

He waved and left the store, making the chime ring again. There was a somewhat gloomy aura around him as he walked away. I tilted my head as I wondered why.

2

Several days passed.

Kiyotaka erased all of the equations he’d written on the whiteboard and turned around to face the middle school boys sitting well-behaved at a two-by-four grid of long tables. They were all wearing different school uniforms. This white-walled classroom that resembled a conference room was where Kiyotaka was teaching as a short-term cram school instructor, and the lesson had just ended.

“Now then, this marks the end of the course. Thank you for staying with me for this short period of time. You’re all excellent students and I learned a lot myself. It was a great experience.” He smiled and placed a hand on his chest.

The students teared up. One of them shouted, “Thank you too, Mr. Yagashira,” prompting the others to bow and thank him as well.

“It was a short course, but we were really happy to be taught by you.”

“I’m going to go to Kyoto University so that I can become one of your juniors and see you again.”

“I wish you could stay here forever, Mr. Yagashira. I want to learn more from you.”

Kiyotaka smiled happily as he listened to them, his eyes narrowing into arcs. “Thank you. I’m honored to hear that. However, I put everything that I’m able to teach into these three weeks. I hope that you will use all of your experiences as motivation to do your best. And I look forward to seeing you all again someday when you’ve grown up. Now then...” He looked around at all of the students. “I’ll be taking questions again today. They can be about school or anything else. Remember, this will be the last time.”

Kiyotaka had been taking post-class questions ever since he started teaching at the cram school. At first, they had been school-related questions, but the students had gradually begun asking more personal questions, and by now it had become a general advice session.

One of the students timidly raised his hand. “Um, I’ve always wanted to ask you this. How do you become popular with girls?”

His question caused quite a stir in the room. Apparently, everyone wanted to know.

“Don’t be stupid,” another student retorted. “Asking someone good-looking isn’t going to help.”

“Yeah, everyone knows rule number one is ‘be attractive,’” added another.

Kiyotaka shrugged lightly and said, “I appreciate the compliment, but I’m not popular, so I’m not sure if I can be helpful in that sense.”

“There he goes again,” said the students with looks of utter disbelief on their faces.

“I’ve said this to someone else before, but popular men are very good at closing the distance between women and themselves. It may sound extreme, but as long as you can do that, it doesn’t matter what you look like. However, there is an absolute prerequisite that must be met before you can close the distance.” He picked up a marker and began writing on the whiteboard.

“A prerequisite?” the students murmured. They focused on what their teacher was saying with bated breath.

Kiyotaka wrote “cleanliness” on the board and turned around to face them again.

“Cleanliness?” blurted out one of the boys in the front row, sounding slightly disappointed. The others seemed let down too.

“Yes, it’s something completely normal. However, this is an absolute requirement for being popular. No matter what kind of physical appearance you have, you must have a sense of cleanliness.

For example, even if you're overweight, as long as you're clean, girls won't find you unpleasant. In fact, you could even turn your weight into a positive image by giving off the impression of a teddy bear."

The overweight students' eyes lit up at his words.

"To put it crudely, men and women originally began with the instinct to pass on good genes. The reason many of them look for beautiful people is because it's an easily recognizable form of superiority. But that doesn't mean it's necessary to be beautiful, because good looks are only one possible asset someone can have. Basically, you just need to be superior at one thing. If you're good at studying or athletics, then excel at those. It can be anything, be it writing, cooking, or playing video games. If you can hone your strength and become a professional in that field, you'll inevitably gain both confidence and wealth, which is sure to attract the opposite sex."

The boys all looked at him with shining eyes. One of them asked, "Um, so after closing the distance, what should we do?"

"That depends on the case, of course. Assess the situation and think about your next move. Typically, you want to wait and see what the other person does and respond to it calmly. In recent years, people have been applying *The Art of War* to business situations, and I think it can also be useful in love."

"*The Art of War*..." the students murmured, nodding in understanding.

"That said, try not to be too calculating. As a man, you should always strive to be a gentleman capable of protecting women. That's all the advice I can give. This isn't my field of expertise, sorry." Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and bowed slightly.

The students stood up and applauded, tears welling up in their eyes.

"You really are amazing, Mr. Yagashira! Thank you for everything!"

"I'll live by your teachings!"

Outside the room, the manager who had hired Kiyotaka was facepalming. "This atmosphere is so scary," he said to the young man standing beside him. "Oh, it looks like Mr. Yagashira's class is over. Everyone's grades went up in a short period of time, so we're really grateful he came."

The young man—Akihito—shrugged and threw the door open. Kiyotaka, who was erasing the whiteboard, turned around in surprise.

"Akihito?"

The actor walked up to the front of the room, pushing Kiyotaka aside and causing quite a stir among the students.

"Isn't that Akihito Kajiwarara?" asked one of them.

"It's Blue from *Local Rangers*," confirmed another.

Akihito took a deep breath and shouted, "Oh, for crying out loud! What do you mean, 'wait and see'?! *The Art of War*?! You don't need that annoying stuff for love! Listen up, kids! If you like a girl, shout 'I love you!' at the top of your lungs! If she rejects you, move on to the next one! That's all you need to do, isn't it?! If you start thinking about love logically, you'll end up like this irritating guy who has a girlfriend but keeps dragging his heels instead of making a move on her!" He ended his speech by slamming the desk.

The students looked at each other and let out loud, excited cheers.

3

"Ahhh, that was refreshing," said Akihito, sipping the iced coffee he'd been served through a straw.

"Why did you come here?" Kiyotaka glared at the actor.

The two men were sitting opposite each other in the school's small reception room. Since it was mainly used for parent-teacher interviews, it was a drab space with only a table and four chairs.

"Oh, are you mad at me?" Akihito looked up at Kiyotaka, the straw still in his mouth.

"No, not really. Your speech was magnificent. You spoke the truth."

"Ooh, you think so?"

"Yes, I wouldn't have any problems if I could be like you. After all, I'm an irritating guy who has a girlfriend but keeps dragging his heels instead of making a move on her," Kiyotaka said nonchalantly, taking a sip of his coffee.

"Okay, you're definitely mad. You must think you lost face in front of your followers."

"Oh, no, I'm not concerned about what they think of me. It's up to them whether they admire me or are disappointed with me. I'll keep being myself either way."

"Huh, now *that* I can relate to."

"I imagine you would. Anyway, what did you need me for?"

"Oh, right, you heartless bastard." Akihito suddenly had a resentful look in his eyes.

"What makes me heartless?" Kiyotaka put down his cup and tilted his head.

"You should've said something if you were coming to Tokyo. Isn't that what friends do?"

"I didn't come here for fun, and besides, aren't you busy too?"

"Well, yeah. I've been ridiculously busy lately."

"And despite being so busy, you came here. You want to ask me to do something for you, right?"

“Always quick on the uptake, huh? Yeah, I have a favor to ask. I know you’re busy, so this is only if you have time in your schedule. Can you be my assistant and manager, just for a day?”

“Only for a day?” Kiyotaka’s eyes widened at the unexpected request.

“Yeah.” Akihito nodded and rummaged loudly through his bag. “I asked someone at my agency to write up the job description and compensation.” The brown envelope he took out was crumpled, earning him an exasperated look.

Kiyotaka took the papers out of the envelope and stroked his chin. “An event in Osaka?”

“Yeah, but will you already be at your next job by then?”

“Yes, I’ll be working as a temporary lecturer at Kyoto Seika University.”

“I see.” Akihito slumped his shoulders.

“However, I won’t have work on the day of the event.”

“Huh?” The actor’s eyes lit up.

“Ah well, why not? It’s only for a day and the compensation isn’t bad. Besides, I want to repay my debt to you.”

Akihito tilted his head. “Huh? Did I lend you something?”

Kiyotaka fell silent for a moment before chuckling.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Oh, it’s nothing.” He laughed again as if he just couldn’t stop himself.

“You’re creeping me out, man.”

“My apologies. I couldn’t help but envy you.”

“You envy me? Oh, is that why you accepted the job?”

“No, that’s not it. One of the reasons is because of the location. This brings back memories...” Kiyotaka smiled as he looked down at the document.

“Oh, did you go there when you were a kid too?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Yeah, HiraPa is like a spiritual home for people in Kansai. Did the manager take you there?”

“Yes, and so did Ueda. Rikyu also came with us once.” Kiyotaka picked up the Hirakata Park brochure attached to the job description with a paper clip and murmured, “It really is nostalgic.”

“I didn’t think you’d accept the job so easily,” Akihito said with a chuckle.

“By the way, Akihito...”

“Yeah?”

“Is there anything you want to talk to me about? Something troubling you, perhaps?” Kiyotaka asked, putting the papers on the desk and making eye contact with the young actor.

“Uh...no, not really.”

“Not really?”

“Yeah, I was worried you wouldn’t take the job, but now that’s resolved, so there’s nothing else.”

“Why do you want me to be your manager in the first place?”

“Because it’s an important event. I trust you, so I’ll feel better with your support. I’m counting on you,” he said, flashing his pearly teeth.

“All right.”

“How long are you going to be in Tokyo? I want to introduce you to the staff. Now that your teaching job is over, are you gonna fly home to see Aoi right away?” he pressed, putting down the teacup he’d been holding.

“No. Of course, I’d love to rush home, but I plan on staying in Tokyo a little longer. I have some other things to do.”

“Like what?”

“I’m going to visit my grandfather’s acquaintance who owns an antique store in Minami-Aoyama.”

“You never have it easy, huh? Could you stop by the studio afterwards? We’ll be filming all day, so it’s okay if you come late.”

“All right. I’ll come by when I’m done with my business.”

“Sweet, I’ll send you the address.” Akihito looked down at his watch, drank the rest of his tea, and stood up.

“Are you going back to work?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re really in demand now, huh? Doesn’t it get difficult with everything going on in the entertainment industry?”

“Yeah, I guess,” he answered curtly. “Well, see you tomorrow.”

Akihito left the reception room, leaving Kiyotaka by himself. The young appraiser nodded and folded his arms.

“Aoi was right. He *is* acting a little strange.”

4

After helping out at an old antique store in Minami-Aoyama, Kiyotaka leisurely walked down the street it was on. Its official name was Minamimachi Street, but it was colloquially known as Kotto Street—the Japanese word for “antique.” There had once been a Toden tram line on this road. Despite the old-fashioned ambience the street’s name conveyed, it was actually a normal urban townscape with office buildings and apartments. There were antique stores too, of course, but not so many that they were standing side-by-side. Still, the furniture stores and cafes here and there made for a nice atmosphere.

I should’ve chosen to live around here, Kiyotaka thought as he

surveyed the area. Since he had been born and raised in the old capital, the Tokyo metropolis was very exciting to him. He was glad that he had visited again.

From there, he went to Shibuya. The studio was a five-minute walk from the station. He informed Akihito that he'd be arriving soon and got an "All right; my manager said he'd pick you up at the lobby" in response.

Kiyotaka frowned as he entered the building. Obviously, Akihito had a formal manager. Was it really acceptable for him to work in public without that manager, even if it was only for a day?

The building seemed to house major corporate offices in addition to the studio. There were many people coming and going. A man wearing glasses who looked like he was in his mid-thirties came through the security gate. He was smiling and seemed like a kind and earnest person, and as soon as he spotted Kiyotaka, he jogged up to him and said, "You're Kiyotaka Yagashira, right?"

"Yes."

"You're as handsome as I heard you were. Oh, sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Tamachi. Thank you for always helping Kajiwara." He bowed and offered his business card.

Kiyotaka took out his own, exchanged it with the man's, and looked down at the business card he'd received.

Yoichi Tamachi

Talent Production

AK Company

"Thank you for agreeing to be his manager for a day," Tamachi said, bowing even deeper.

Kiyotaka shook his head. "It feels like I'm intruding since he already has you. He must've made an unreasonable demand."

"No, I want to make this event at HiraPa a success, just like he does. When he said he wanted you to help out as his manager for a day, I thought it was a great idea."

Kiyotaka gave a reserved smile. *So he did make an unreasonable demand.*

"I'll show you to the studio," said Tamachi. "Here's your guest card."

Kiyotaka accepted the pass and followed the man through the gate and into the glass-walled elevator.

As he was gazing at the view of the Shibuya Station area below them, Tamachi shrugged lightly and said, "Since you came from Kyoto, our city must look like a chaotic mess to you."

"No, I'm a country bumpkin, so I was just excited to see the big city."

"You definitely don't look like one. Besides, isn't Kyoto considered

a major population center?" Tamachi chuckled.

"It is, but Kyoto is actually quite rural."

"Is that so?"

"That's one of the great things about it."

"You really love your hometown, huh?"

They continued to chat as they got off the elevator and went to the place where the filming was taking place. Tamachi stopped in front of the door and said, "Here we are. Try to be as quiet as possible."

He gently opened the door, revealing a glaringly bright set surrounded by cameras and lights. The actors were in their positions and the crew was busily moving around, preparing for the next scene. Akihito was there as Kanto Blue, accompanied by Tohoku Green and the female ranger, Chubu Purple. The three of them were sitting at a dining table. It looked like the next scene would be them having a meal. Hokkaido White was standing in the kitchen, mumbling, "Dinner's ready. I made my favorite cream stew tonight." Perhaps he was nervous about getting his lines right.

The other actors' managers were on standby in the corner. Including Tamachi, the managers consisted of three men and one woman.

"Is the female manager Purple's?" Kiyotaka asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes." Tamachi nodded. "I'll introduce you now before the filming starts," he said, walking up to the other managers. "Everyone, this is Kiyotaka Yagashira. He'll be helping Kajiwarra at the HiraPa event."

"I'm Kiyotaka Yagashira. I look forward to working with you." Kiyotaka bowed.

The first of the three to speak was the woman. "Hello, I'm Purple's manager, Okazaki. Nice to meet you." She was in her late twenties and looked smart and pretty.

"I'm Green's manager, Miyagi," said a man in his mid-thirties with a curt bow. Rather than unfriendly, he seemed socially awkward.

"I'm Hidaka, and I'm in charge of White. Nice to meet you." This man was in his early thirties and had a gentle smile.

Kiyotaka bowed again. "Nice to meet you."

"Oh, right, let me give you a brief explanation of *Local Rangers* while we're here," Tamachi said, taking some documents out of his bag. "In season one, Kanto Blue first befriends Tohoku Green, followed by Chubu Purple, Hokkaido White, and lastly, Kansai Yellow. The upcoming event in Hirakata Park is to celebrate the second season announcement and Kansai Yellow joining the team."

Kiyotaka nodded.

"Akihito was really happy. He said that 'the most amazing helper' was coming. Thank you again for accepting the job." Tamachi bowed

again.

Kiyotaka shook his head. "I hope I can be of help. I don't know anything about this industry, though, so I'll try my best not to be a burden. By the way, has anything changed about Akihito recently?"

"Changed?"

"He seemed to be slightly dispirited when I last saw him."

Tamachi lowered his gaze and hesitantly said, "It might be because of the haters."

"Haters?"

"Yes, the popularity of the show made Akihito Kajiwaru a household name. He's loved for his personality, but there are also more people calling him annoying and irritating now."

Kiyotaka gave a silent nod.

"The rangers have a special website," Tamachi continued, taking out his phone and bringing up the site. "We never had much of a budget for it, so it's handled by people working behind the scenes on the production, including us managers."

Hidaka, Miyagi, and Okazaki nodded in affirmation.

"I underestimated the job when I accepted it, thinking it'd only be temporary," Hidaka said with a shrug. "But in addition to supportive messages, the site also gets a lot of comments that say, 'Akihito Kajiwaru isn't suitable for the role, so get rid of him.' We obviously reject those comments, so Akihito hasn't seen them, but I'm sure those opinions have reached his ears."

"Why don't they think he's suitable?" Kiyotaka asked in a defensive tone. "I think he's doing quite a good job." He hadn't seen every episode of the show, but he knew that it leveraged Akihito's good qualities, and most importantly, Akihito himself was working very hard. But Kiyotaka quickly came to his senses, remembering that haters were fueled by emotion rather than logic. He mentally scolded himself for letting the inconsiderate posts get him worked up.

"I thought you were a calm person, but I guess it's different when it comes to friends," Tamachi said with a chuckle.

Kiyotaka smiled awkwardly, feeling ashamed.

"The reason they say he's unsuitable is that he's the Kanto ranger. Tohoku's Green Ranger is played by an actor from Sendai, Chubu's Purple Ranger is played by an actress from Nagoya, and Hokkaido's White Ranger is played by an actor from Ebetsu. Akihito's mother is from the Kanto region, but he grew up in Kyoto and his father is from Kyushu. People think his mixed background makes him an unsuitable representative for Kanto. It's only some people, though. They're outnumbered by his fans, and a lot of people do express their love for him...but I wonder if the criticism is hard for him to put up with."

Miyagi sighed and said, "People called Green unsuitable too. They

want him to talk in a stronger Tohoku accent. He's from Sendai, though, so he doesn't use that accent to begin with."

"That makes sense," Kiyotaka said, nodding. "The Kyoto accent is quite famous too, but a lot of people in Kyoto speak in a way that closely resembles standard Japanese."

"Oh, right," said Tamachi, taking out some documents. "These are the materials for *Local Rangers*. There's a summary of the story so far."

"Thank you." Kiyotaka looked at the pages.

The story of the local rangers was as follows:

Akihito Aoyama (same first name as the actor) is a slightly superficial young man who works at will at an IT company in Tokyo. One day, he begins to see dark shadows that appear from space-time distortions and possess people. The people possessed by these shadows change drastically, lashing out violently or committing crimes while acting normal.

One of Akihito's close friends at work gets possessed by a shadow. He embezzles company money, pins the blame on Akihito, and disappears. After being fired for someone else's crime, Akihito is at his wits' end when a mysterious girl wearing a silver cloak appears before him, calling herself the Shepherd.

"A gateway between this world and another dimension has been opened, and evil beings are invading. They are like viruses that feed on desire and multiply. You who can see the dark shadows are one of the people who will save the world—the Blue Ranger who protects Kanto," she declares, and so the story begins.

Akihito doesn't believe the girl, but he learns that his coworker who ran away is planning to blow up the Miyagase Dam and runs to Kanagawa to try to stop him. While he's there, he introduces the sights of Kanagawa as he searches for his possessed coworker's hideout. It turns out to be a whole den of people who have been corrupted by the dark shadows, and they all attack him at once. Akihito finds himself in a bind, but at the last second, he transforms into the Blue Ranger and turns the tables on them. Once the enemies are all apprehended, the shadows disappear and the possessed people, including his coworker, return to normal. The problem is solved, but Akihito learns that there are still other people out there who are being possessed by the dark shadows.

"There is a ranger in every region. Search for them and awaken them to their powers," the Shepherd instructs him. And so, he sets off on a journey to find his allies.

The first person to join him is Tohoku's Green Ranger, Kazuya Midorisawa. He's a student at Tohoku University, wears glasses, and has a cool, quiet demeanor. He's handsome in a different way than

Akihito, and his hobby is reading fine literature. He's the intelligent type who doesn't say much, but he occasionally lets his Tohoku accent slip, and that contrasting image earns him a lot of fans. His favorite foods are apples, sea urchins on rice, beef tongue, and kiritanpo rice sticks, all of which are Tohoku specialties.

Next to join their team is Chubu's Purple Ranger, Sumire Shion, a gorgeous woman with beautifully curled chestnut-brown hair and large, bright eyes. She's the young president of an apparel company that handles popular brands, and she's always wearing a flashy suit. Her appearance makes her seem unapproachable, but she's surprisingly manly and sociable. She loves going to bars, and she's popular with both men and women. Her favorite foods are chicken wings, deep fried pork cutlet with miso sauce, and fried shrimp.

The third new member is Hokkaido's White Ranger, Yukiya Shirakawa, a young man with a cute, boyish face. He helps out at a farm, and Akihito persuades him to join the team from on top of a bale of hay, which becomes a hot topic. His favorite foods are sticky potato cakes, seafood, and creamy white stew.

The final member in season one is Kansai's Yellow Ranger, Takayuki Kijima. His trademark is his short blond hair, and he's a traveling actor who tours the Kansai region. He's a smooth talker who gives off a mischievous impression, and he's friendly and funny. His favorite foods are simmered beef tendon and takoyaki. The upcoming event at HiraPa is to commemorate him joining the group.

Kiyotaka frowned after going over the materials that Tamachi gave him.

"Is something wrong?" Tamachi asked, peering into his face.

"It says that Kijima's favorite foods are simmered beef tendon and takoyaki," Kiyotaka said, pointing at the description of the Kansai character.

"Right."

"Those are Osaka specialties, aren't they? I've never liked it when people equate Kansai with Osaka. At the very least, I'd like you to add something with a Kyoto flavor, like boiled tofu."

"But I don't think boiled tofu would suit Kijima's personality. Besides, although the character is from Osaka, the program introduces the entire Kansai region. Most importantly, the decision isn't up to me..."

Upon seeing the manager's flustered reaction, Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and smiled. "Sorry, I didn't mean to get worked up."

"So it's true that Kyoto people and Osaka people compete with each other," remarked Okazaki, who had been listening to their conversation.

“What is there to compete over? We’re the former capital city of Japan, you know?”

Everyone was rendered speechless.

“This really is quite a fun premise, though,” Kiyotaka continued. The managers were relieved that he’d changed the subject.

“Yes, we thought it would be fun too,” said Okazaki. “We didn’t expect it to be *this* popular, though.” She giggled.

“Yes, we’re practically screaming with joy,” Miyagi agreed.

“Because of the unexpected success, the producer was suddenly replaced with someone really skilled and famous,” said Hidaka, his eyes shining.

Kiyotaka looked at the materials again. The producer’s name was listed as Shimizu. “Oh?”

“Do you know him?”

“Yes, he often appears on TV.”

Producers worked behind the scenes, but Shimizu was the type who wanted to be out in public. He was something of an entertainer himself.

“It doesn’t look like he’s here right now, though,” Kiyotaka added, looking around the studio.

“Yes, he’s not coming today,” Miyagi confirmed. “The producer may be in charge of the show but mainly deals with desk work related to planning and production. It’s the director who supervises the filming. The previous producer was enthusiastic about coming to the set, though.”

Kiyotaka nodded silently.

“Shimizu’s a busy man,” Hidaka said with a nod.

“Was the HiraPa event planned by the previous producer, then?” Kiyotaka asked.

“He suggested it,” answered Okazaki. “The previous producer was from Kansai, and he said it would be fun to hold an event at HiraPa. But then he was suddenly replaced, so the planning was done by the new producer.”

“Shimizu is going to be attending, so I think you’ll be able to meet him there,” Tamachi added.

“I see,” Kiyotaka said, smiling even though he hadn’t been interested in meeting the man in the first place.

“I thought we’d get a bigger budget with the new producer, but apparently not,” Tamachi lamented. “The website is still run by the managers, and there’s so much work we have to do for the HiraPa event.” He sighed.

Hidaka clenched his fist and said, “But it’s bound to be a great event, since Shimizu is really good at creating entertainment.”

“Holmes!” shouted Akihito, running up to them. The blue

highlights in his hair sparkled.

“Good work, Akihito.”

“Thanks for coming. Let me introduce you to my costars.” He beckoned to the other rangers.

White, Purple, and Green nodded and walked over. Yellow was not present.

“Here, we call each other by our colors or roles,” Akihito explained. “I’m Blue, but since my character’s name is the same as my real name, people also call me Akihito. Everyone, this is my best friend, Kiyotaka Yagashira. He’s going to be my manager for a day at the upcoming event. His nickname is ‘Holmes.’”

After introducing Kiyotaka, he went to the closest ranger, a baby-faced young man, and put his hand on his shoulder. “This guy with the devilishly cute face is the White Ranger, Shirakawa. He’s been in the entertainment industry since he was a child, so despite his looks, he’s a real veteran.”

The adorable Shirakawa laughed and said, “I was only on local shows in Hokkaido, though. Thanks to *Local Rangers*, I’m on the national stage now, and both my manager and I are ecstatic. Oh, and it’s nice to meet you, Holmes. Akihito talks about you all the time.”

“Nice to meet you too,” said Kiyotaka.

“Next, this is the Purple Ranger, Shion,” Akihito continued. “She’s really pretty, but she’s also friendly and acts like a big sister. Even though this is her debut role, she already has a lot of friends in the entertainment industry.”

Shion giggled and smiled. “You’re too handsome to settle for being a manager, Holmes. It’s nice to meet you. I’m Shion, or Purple. People often think I’m in my late twenties, but I’m still a twenty-year-old girl.” She grinned and struck a pose.

Akihito did the same and said, “People often think I’m twenty, but I’m already a boy in my late twenties.”

“I’m aware,” replied Kiyotaka, giving him a frigid glare. “And you can hardly be called a ‘boy.’”

“You’re as cold as ever, huh? Midorisawa is similar in that sense. He’s always glaring at me. Well, this is him, the Green Ranger. He’s a smart student at Tohoku University, he’s serious, and he doesn’t talk much. He debuted at the Tohoku ranger audition but it was because his friend signed him up.” Akihito put his hand on Midorisawa’s shoulder.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Midorisawa,” the man said curtly, bowing.

Shirakawa was cute and soft, Shion was cheerful and gorgeous, and Green was calm and untalkative. It felt more like they were using their own personalities rather than playing roles. Their managers also seemed to have similar vibes, with the exception of Akihito’s manager,

Tamachi.

"It's nice to meet you all. I'm Kiyotaka Yagashira," Kiyotaka said again, bowing deeply. "I look forward to working with you."

5

The grandfather clock in Kura chimed seven times, indicating that it was 7 p.m. Since the days were short in winter and Holmes wasn't around, this was Kura's current closing time.

"It's already seven..." I murmured.

Since there weren't any customers coming in, I'd been studying from an art book when the clock rang. I shut the book and prepared to close shop. The manager had been in until the evening, but he had gone to a nearby coffee shop with a woman who seemed to be his editor.

Should I go ahead and close the store?

I looked at the things the manager had left behind and decided to just put the "CLOSED" sign up for the time being. As I did so, I saw the manager and the aforementioned woman having a conversation outside. The manager was nodding while listening to what she said. It seemed like the woman was crying.

The suggestive situation startled me. *Maybe that woman isn't his editor.* I hurriedly turned to go back inside, but I didn't make it before making eye contact with the manager. He bowed to the woman and came back to the store.

"Oh, it's already closing time," he remarked.

"Um, yes."

We went inside and began tidying up. I was curious about the crying woman but remained silent, assuming it wasn't something I could ask about.

The manager scratched his head weakly and said, "Please don't misunderstand, Aoi. That was a writer I know, and she was asking me for advice."

"Oh, I see."

"She went from being a novelist to a freelance broadcast writer, and it seems that the TV industry is rife with hardships," he said with a bitter expression.

"You're a really kind and considerate person, so people must find you easy to approach for advice."

"No, that's not it. I just happened to know the other people involved. At any rate, having your ideas plagiarized is truly reprehensible," he muttered.

I furrowed my brow. "Someone plagiarized her ideas?"

"She said she proposed a project and it was rejected, but then the

idea was used without her permission.”

“What? Isn’t that practically stealing?”

“Yes, but the person is too influential and there isn’t enough proof, so she said she might have no choice but to give up. I wish I could help her, but I’m a useless man who can’t do anything except write.” He sighed.

“That’s not true,” I said, shaking my head.

“So I’m thinking of asking Kiyotaka.”

“Oh,” I said with a smile. “I was surprised, though. I thought for sure that she was your girlfriend.”

“No, a woman that young wouldn’t possibly be interested in me.”

“I don’t think that’s true. You’re a wonderful person, so I secretly thought you’d be popular with women. You received a lot of chocolate last month for Valentine’s Day, didn’t you?”

“Those were just obligatory gifts from colleagues. The only other people who gave me chocolate were you and Kaori, so I was really happy.”

I blinked. “Kaori gave you chocolate?” I was a little surprised because she hadn’t told me about it.

“She said she happened to be in the area and wanted to thank me for going to the Demachiyanagi event. She’s a kind and attentive person, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” I said, nodding. *Kaori really has a strong sense of duty, huh?*

“By the way, Kiyotaka finished his work in Tokyo, didn’t he? Where is he going next?”

“I heard he’s going to be a temp lecturer at Kyoto Seika University until spring break. He’s also going to be Akihito’s manager for a day.” Holmes had told me this over the phone last night.

“It sounds like he’ll be very busy. Has he returned to Kyoto yet?”

“He’s coming back today.” He had said he was going to help at an antique store in Minami-Aoyama and then say hi to Akihito before coming back, so... “I’m sure it won’t be until late at night.” I shrugged as I closed the curtains.

“If you’re lonely, you should tell him so, all right? Even though he’s so perceptive, he’s hopeless when it comes to love.”

The manager was sensitive when it came to the subtleties of the heart. He must have realized that I was nearing my limits. And of course, he knew his son well. Holmes himself had said before that his senses were duller when it came to love, so perhaps the manager was right. *But what would happen if I told Holmes that I was lonely? It would just make him push himself harder.*

“I’m fine. He’ll be working at a university in Kyoto for the next little while, so I think I’ll be able to see him more often.”

Just as I put on a smile, the door chime rang.

“Oh, Aoi. Thank goodness you’re still here,” came a familiar, relieved voice from behind my back.

I whirled around and saw Holmes there with a suitcase, smiling happily at me.

“Holmes...”

“Aren’t you glad?” the manager said to me before addressing his son. “Welcome back, Kiyotaka.”

“Thank you.”

“I heard you’ll be at a university in the city next. Where will you be staying?”

“The owner told me not to go home, but it feels like a waste of money to rent a place here. Would it be all right if I went back to the apartment in Yasaka? It was in a miserable state the last time I was there.”

“That would be a great help. I’ll keep it a secret from the owner. I should really tidy up the place a bit, so I’ll go home first. You can finish closing up the shop with Aoi in my stead. See you,” he said, swiftly heading for the exit.

“All right,” Holmes said, bowing and chuckling. “It looks like he’s being considerate of us.”

He turned around and before I knew it, I was running towards him. I saw his eyes widen in surprise as I leaped into his chest and gripped his shirt.

“Aoi?!”

He was clearly bewildered, but I couldn’t say anything because the moment my forehead touched his chest, I broke down in tears. My sobs echoed in the quiet store.

“Aoi...” He patted my head with his large hand as I clung to him and cried. “I’m sorry, Aoi.”

I shook my head without looking up.

“I’ve made you really lonely,” he continued. “Since you’re always cheerful and energetic, I assumed you might be fine without me around. I have some confidence in my perception, but it’s useless when it comes to you,” he said, sounding truly apologetic.

I shook my head again. “Don’t apologize...” As he’d said, I had been cheerful and energetic. Even I had thought I was fine. “I’m just happy to see you again,” I said, squeezing his shirt.

Not a second later, Holmes hugged me tightly. “Aoi!”

Our lips met, and I wrapped my hands around his back too, clinging to him. It was a mature kiss—different from the ones we’d exchanged before. Afterwards, I rested my cheek against his chest, too embarrassed to look up. We held each other, seeking solace in each other’s presence. His warmth was comforting, making my heart swell with happiness.

After that, Holmes made delicious coffee, and we sat at the counter, talking about things for as long as time permitted.

6

It was a certain Friday evening in March. Kaori and I were visiting Hirakata Park, an amusement park in Hirakata City that was commonly abbreviated to “HiraPa.” We had taken the Keihan Line from Demachiyanagi Station to Hirakata-koen Station, from which the park was only a five-minute walk.

“This theme park is easy to get to, huh?” I murmured as I gazed at the entry gate with its large “HIRAKATA PARK” sign.

Kaori looked at me in surprise. “Wait, have you never been to HiraPa?”

“No, I’ve only heard the name. Have you come here before?”

“Well, yes. I think almost everyone from the Kansai region has been to HiraPa at least once as a child.”

“Oh, is it that well known?”

“Yep, it’s like a spiritual home for us.”

“A spiritual home... That’s the oldest amusement park in western Japan for you, I guess.”

“Huh?” Kaori’s eyes widened. “HiraPa is the oldest one in western Japan?”

“Yeah, that’s what Holmes said. According to him, the oldest one in Japan that’s still in operation is Hanayashiki in Asakusa, and HiraPa is second. But Hanayashiki was closed for a period of time, while HiraPa always stayed open.”

“He really is a know-it-all.”

“Yeah.” I nodded and looked around. “There are so many people here...”

There was a huge crowd in front of the entrance. Since today’s event was taking place after hours, the doors would be opening at 5:30 p.m. The people who had bought advance tickets formed a long line outside. In addition to parents and children, there were a lot of young men and women holding round fans that said things like “Blue Akihito LOVE,” “Lord Midorisawa,” “We’ve been waiting for you, Yellow!”, and “White is the cutest.” Underneath the large sign that said “The Local Rangers Come to HiraPa! Yellow’s Final Stage: Dojo-ji” was a note that said “Tickets for today’s event are sold out. Only ticket holders will be admitted.”

The staff were frantically trying to manage the crowd. “Sorry, please wait a little longer until 5:30. All tickets for today’s *Local Rangers* event are sold out. There are no same-day tickets available. Those who have tickets, please form two lines at the entrance. After

entering, please refrain from running. Since the park will be closed, you will not be able to use any of the rides except for the Ferris wheel. Please..."

"The Local Rangers sure are popular," Kaori remarked as we joined the back of the line.

"I didn't think there'd be this much of a crowd. What do they mean by not running, though? It's not like people will be able to take a picture with the rangers if they run." *And even though the rides are lit up, we can't use them because the park is closed.*

"What are you talking about? Everyone wants to get good seats at the outdoor stage."

"Oh, I see."

"Yellow is a traveling actor, and in order to take up his ranger activities, he has to leave the acting industry. So he's making HiraPa his final stage and the other rangers are joining in too. There's going to be singing, dancing, and a talk show, so I'm really excited. I never would've been able to get tickets on my own, so I'm grateful to Holmes." She clasped her hands in front of her chest and smiled fondly.

Back when Holmes had given me the tickets, I was worried that Kaori wouldn't be interested in coming to a ranger event with me. I hadn't expected her to be so eager.

"Which one do you like, Kaori?"

"Hmm, I'm rooting for Akihito since I know him, but White is cute and I like the new member, Yellow, too. He seems upfront and honest. What about you?"

"I kind of like Green because even though he's usually calm and collected, sometimes his Tohoku accent slips out and he gets embarrassed by it."

"Oh, yeah, you're into that kind of thing." She glanced at me with teasing eyes.

"It's not like that, okay? Oh, and I like Purple too since she's friendly and chivalrous even though she's so gorgeous."

"Oh, me too. And I heard that Purple and Green debuted at the ranger audition."

"Really? Purple has such a strong presence that it's hard to believe she only recently debuted. I know that Green's a student at Tohoku University in real life, though."

"Right, his friend signed him up for the audition in Tohoku. The second season is going to have Red from Chugoku, Orange from Shikoku, and Pink from Kyushu, so that'll be fun."

"Yeah."

Kaori and I waited for the doors to open, squealing about the rangers like the rest of the crowd was.

The people involved with the show had already arrived at Hirakata Park at 9 a.m. They spent the entire day rehearsing in an event hall, and when the park closed, they moved to the outdoor stage to perform the final checks.

The director was standing in front of the stage, shouting instructions. "After the dance, the emcee comes out. Then the rangers call out to the audience." After a quick review of the program, he clapped his hands and said, "It's almost time for the show. Rangers, go on standby. Makeup artists, do your checks."

Everyone voiced their acknowledgment and went back to the green room behind the stage. Akihito remained on stage and stretched his arms, looking up at the evening sky.

"Good work, Akihito," said Kiyotaka, handing the actor a towel.

"Thanks, man. I'm glad it's sunny today."

"Indeed."

In the case of rain, the event would have been held in the indoor hall they had been rehearsing in. They still would've been able to put on a good show, but it couldn't compare to the feeling of freedom outdoors. Being able to see the large Ferris wheel from the stage filled Akihito with excitement.

Kiyotaka looked up at the Ferris wheel and the sunset behind it and smiled.

"Are you in a good mood today or something?" Akihito asked, crossing his arms and glancing at him.

"Is that how it seems? I'm generally always in a good mood."

"Yeah, I guess you always look that way. But this time it feels genuine, like it's not just on the surface."

Kiyotaka chuckled and relaxed his expression. "Yes, I've been in an extremely good mood lately. I feel blessed."

"I'd ask why, but it's because you can be with Aoi now that you're in Kyoto, right?" Akihito asked, looking slightly fed up.

"Yes, and most of all, when we finally met again the other day, she was just so—"

"Yeah, yeah, she was cute, wasn't she?" Akihito gave an annoyed shrug.

"Of course she was, but the word 'cute' by itself doesn't do her justice."

Akihito said nothing.

"She was so cute and lovely—how do I put this? Right, that was the moment I truly understood the meaning of the word 'precious,'" Kiyotaka said earnestly, placing a hand on his chest.

"I seriously have no idea what you're trying to say, man."

"You don't need to understand. I hope the time will come when

you too can truly comprehend the meaning of the word ‘precious.’”

“Why’re you suddenly acting like you’re better than me? Now I’m annoyed.”

“More importantly, we should prepare for the show.”

“Yeah.”

They went to the green room and found White and Green sitting down with anxious looks on their faces. Yellow was humming and adjusting his short blond hair in front of the mirror. Purple was with the Shepherd, who was acting as the emcee for the event. They commented on how nervous they were.

Today was Kiyotaka’s first time meeting Yellow, whose name was Kijima, and the Shepherd. Yellow was originally from a popular theater troupe, as his role suggested. He seemed to be familiar with stage performances. The mysterious and beautiful Shepherd who guided the rangers was played by a sixteen-year-old girl who went by the stage name of Toko. Kiyotaka had seen her on TV before. Though she had grown up as a child actor, she had a fresh, innocent air to her.

“It’s my first time emceeing,” she said. “I don’t know if I can do it well.”

“You’ll be fine, Toko,” Purple said with a smile. It was clear that she had a big-sisterly disposition.

On the other hand, Green and White were nervous wrecks, trembling with grim looks on their faces. It was understandable for Green, who had been an ordinary student until recently, but Kiyotaka found it surprising that White was so nervous despite having a long history in acting.

A middle-aged man entered the room and said, “Good work, everyone.”

They all thanked him and bowed. This was the famous producer, Shimizu, who made frequent appearances on TV. He seemed like he wanted to go on stage too, even though it wasn’t in the script. He was wearing the same silver outfit as the Shepherd.

He looked at Kiyotaka and his eyes widened. “Hm? Who’s this handsome man?”

“I’m—”

Before Kiyotaka could answer, Akihito stepped forward and said, “This is my best friend, Holmes. He’s my manager for the day.”

“I thought I recognized him from somewhere, but he’s not an actor, is he?” Shimizu looked around at everyone. “The doors just opened. You wouldn’t believe how many people there are. Today’s a second audition in a sense, so do your best, everyone,” he said, laughing.

After the play, there was going to be a small event called the “Ranger Election.” Since Shimizu had referred to it as a second

audition, it was possible that members could be replaced depending on the results. Perhaps that was why White was unusually nervous.

“Of course,” Akihito said, clenching his fist. “I always give everything my all.”

“Glad to hear that, young man.” Shimizu nodded and shifted his gaze to Yellow. “Oh, since Yellow’s a newcomer, we’ll take that into account for the election results.”

“Nah, you don’t gotta do that,” Yellow said, speaking in a strong Kansai accent. “This is perfect for my debut. You never know, this could be the day the central ranger switches from Blue to Yellow.”

“What? I’m not gonna lose to you.”

Tamachi panicked at the sight of Akihito and Yellow butting heads. “Calm down, you two...”

“It’s fine,” said Shimizu. “It makes things interesting.” He smiled and looked at everyone. “Now that I’m the producer, I’m going to do away with the amateurish vibe of the series. The plan is to cover the sophisticated aspects of each city and get a lot of sponsorship money, which means we have no need for half-baked actors. Those of you who rank low in this popularity contest should be prepared for what’s going to happen.”

Everyone exchanged glances. They all seemed to have something on their minds, but no one could bring themselves to say it.

Akihito was the one to speak up. “Sorry, Shimizu-P. Didn’t the local rangers become popular in the first place because of the, you know, local-ness of them? I don’t think a sophisticated vibe is right for a local show.”

The other actors nodded in agreement.

“That might’ve been the case before, but if nothing changes, its popularity will peak here. By making it more stylish and fashionable, we can pull in people who haven’t watched it before. Oh, and by the way, I still have high hopes for you, Akihito, so keep up the good work.” Shimizu placed a hand on Akihito’s shoulder.

From this exchange, Kiyotaka got the feeling that Shimizu was planning to replace all of the actors except Akihito in the near future. He shrugged and crossed his arms.

8

The Hirakata Park entrance opened at 5:30 p.m. as scheduled. Even though the staff had warned them not to run, the attendees sprinted towards the stage at full speed the moment they passed through the gate. Overwhelmed by their might, Kaori and I quickly gave up on getting good seats and decided to take a stroll through the park.

There was a rose garden where the roses were in bloom all year round, as well as standard attractions like a merry-go-round, teacups, and roller-coasters. There were also new types of attractions I hadn't seen before. The park had an exciting atmosphere and felt cozy in a nostalgic way. I understood why Kaori had described it as a spiritual home. It was the kind of place where children would come with their parents, and then when they grew up and became parents themselves, they'd bring their own children, think back to when they were young, and be filled with emotion.

"This is a lovely theme park," I said.

"Isn't it?" Kaori nodded, seeming happy.

The outdoor stage was on fairly high ground, and there was a Ferris wheel farther up on top of the hill.

"That Ferris wheel must have a great view," I remarked.

"Yep, you can see the whole area around here. On clear, sunny days, you can even see Kyoto Tower."

"Wow." I looked up at the slowly rotating Ferris wheel.

They said the Ferris wheel was still open, but would we even have time to ride it when we're here for an event? I want to come here for a normal visit next time, I thought as we walked.

In the center of the park, we were startled to come across a life-sized figure of a man in a suit. The words "Local Rangers ☆ Producer Shimizu" were written at his feet. Well, it was designed to look like he was popping out of a jack-in-the-box, so his feet were actually hidden inside the colorful box that reached his ankles.

"Oh, it's Producer Shimizu," I said, surprised.

"Every time I see him on TV, I feel like he's gained weight."

"Yeah."

We walked at a leisurely pace as we talked. Naturally, by the time we reached the stage, there weren't any seats left and we had to stand in an empty space. It had a surprisingly good view, though, so we were satisfied.

At 6 p.m., when the sun was going down, music began to play. It was the *Local Rangers* opening theme, and everyone cheered. The crowd grew even louder when Toko, who played the Shepherd, appeared on stage with Producer Shimizu.

"Good evening, everyone. I'm the Shepherd, and this is..."

"Producer Shimizu!"

The two of them took center stage, both of them wearing silver outfits.

"Thank you for coming to see the rangers today, everyone," said Toko. "I'm touched to see so many people here."

Shouts of "You're welcome!" and "Shepherd!" came from the audience.

“As I’m sure you all know by now, the Yellow Ranger has finally awakened as the guardian of Kansai. Becoming a ranger means that he has to stop being a traveling actor, and Yellow has chosen this outdoor stage in Hirakata Park for his final show. Tonight, the rangers will take the stage together for the first and last time. Please watch over them.”

“We will!” shouted the audience.

“The rangers will be performing *Dojo-ji* with an original twist. Enjoy!”

There was a loud cheer as the show began. I looked at the leaflet I’d received at the entrance. It was titled “Scroll.”

* * *

Kiyotaka was watching from the wings. After Toko and Shimizu left the stage, Green went out wearing a dark green monk’s robe.

Dojo-ji was originally a kabuki dance. It was a famous Noh play and joruri song based on the legend of Anchin and Kiyohime. The story was set in Dojo-ji Temple in Kishu and went as follows:

It was the Heian period. A monk named Anchin (played by Green) came from Shirakawa, Oshu (modern-day Tohoku region) to Kumano on a pilgrimage. This monk was extremely attractive. Kiyohime (played by Purple), the daughter of a respected family in Kishu (modern-day Wakayama Prefecture), fell in love with him at first sight when he lodged at their manor. Despite being a woman, she stole into his bedroom at night.

Anchin said, “I am in the middle of a shrine visit, so being approached like this is problematic. I promise I’ll come see you before I leave.” After finishing his visit, he immediately left without fulfilling his promise.

When Kiyohime realized she’d been tricked, she furiously chased him barefoot and caught up with him on the road to Dojo-ji Temple. Rather than being happy to see her again, the monk lied again, saying, “I am not Anchin. You have the wrong person.” He asked other people (played by the other rangers) for help and tried to escape while Kiyohime was tied up. At this point, Kiyohime’s rage reached the heavens. She transformed into a serpent and went after him.

Anchin fled to Dojo-ji Temple, where he asked the priests (played by the other rangers) to lower the temple bell so that he could hide inside it. But Kiyohime, who had become a giant serpent, coiled around the bell and breathed fire from her mouth. Anchin burned to death inside the bell. After killing the man she loved, Kiyohime drowned herself.

That was the legend of Anchin and Kiyohime.

Taking place some time later was the story of *Musume Dojo-ji*.

Every spring, a ceremony was held at Dojo-ji Temple's bell. One year, a dancer (played by Purple) visited and asked for permission to pay respects to the bell. Women were not allowed inside the temple, but a young priest (played by White) was curious about the dancer and let her in on the condition that she danced for him. Her dance was beautiful, but as she performed, her true form began to reveal itself—she was an incarnation of Kiyohime. Still obsessed with Anchin, she leaped into the bell and possessed it.

The story of *Musume Dojo-ji* ended there, and next was the rangers' original version of the play. Kiyotaka and Tamachi continued to watch from the wings.

* * *

Like the rest of the audience, Kaori and I were absorbed in the rangers' performance. The play was a flashier, modernized rendition of the original classic, and the singing and dancing were incredible. The main characters in the story were Anchin and Kiyohime, played by Green and Purple, respectively, but the other rangers stood out too, singing and dancing as priests and spirits in a bewitching Japanese-style musical. The projection mapping on the screen behind them was beautiful too, keeping the audience glued to the stage.

Finally, it was time for the rangers' original version.

Wanting to appease the spirit of Kiyohime, which was possessing the bell, the young priest of Dojo-ji Temple (played by White) called in two well-known exorcists. One of them was a diviner from Kashima Shrine in the Kanto region (played by Blue), and the other one was a mountain ascetic who had trained in the mountains of Kumano (played by Yellow).

As soon as they appeared on stage, Blue and Yellow began singing and dancing as if they were competing with each other, making the audience gasp in awe. The two exorcists tried to appease the spirit, but Kiyohime's grudge was too strong.

Then, a mountain spirit wearing a silver kimono appeared (played by Toko, the Shepherd).

The young priests started to fuss over her, saying, "Well, well, who's this suspicious fellow?"

"Stop, that's a mountain spirit," said Blue and Yellow in unison.

"Yes, I am a spirit of Mount HiraPa."

Her words were met with a roar of laughter.

"The head priest of Dojo-ji once kept sixteen powerful talismans in the temple," she continued. "However, Kiyohime deceived a young priest and ordered him to take the talismans outside. The wind has scattered them all over the mountain." She turned around, looking in all four cardinal directions. "I ask that you retrieve them all. After

that, an exorcism and ceremony will be able to appease her spirit. However, there are riddles placed on the talismans, so it will not be easy to obtain them. Please proceed with caution..."

Blue turned to face the audience. "You heard what she said, everyone! The talismans we need to seal Kiyohime are hidden around this mountain. Take a look at the scrolls you're holding."

Everyone immediately looked at the leaflet. The back side had a column to write answers in, with sixteen blank squares at the very top.

Next, Yellow shouted, "Solve the riddles and write the first letter of each answer on your scrolls. Then we want you to put them in the boxes in front of the stage."

There were five boxes: blue, green, white, yellow, and purple.

Purple, who had been acting as Kiyohime, switched back to her ranger mask and jumped down from the stage. "Put your scroll in the box corresponding to your favorite ranger. This is a popularity contest—in other words, an election."

"The first thirty people to solve the puzzle will get a hug from their favorite ranger!" White added with a carefree smile.

"There are other prizes for the top winners as well. Do your best," Green said curtly with a bow.

The audience squealed at the thought of a hug from their favorite ranger.

"One more thing," said Shimizu, walking up to the front of the stage. "In addition to the talisman riddles, the rangers' secrets are also hidden around the park."

"Huh?" The rangers tensed up.

Kaori and I looked at each other. Judging from their reactions, this might not have been in the rehearsal.

Shimizu grinned amusedly and said, "That's right—these are the heroes of justice protecting you all, but some of them may be deceiving you. For example, here we have Purple, a beautiful woman who's easygoing and hates lying. But the truth is that she's just good at makeup. Her real face is completely different."

"Don't do it!" Purple shouted, squeezing her eyes shut.

An image of a plain-looking woman with puffy eyelids appeared on the screen at the back of the stage. The audience was shocked to see that it was captioned "Purple Without Makeup."

"Nooo!" Purple shrieked, crouching down on the spot.

Shimizu turned to look at the screen, his faint smile turning into a frown upon seeing the woman's bare face.

The emcee, Toko, spoke next. "And then we have White, who presents himself as a naive-seeming Hokkaido native with an adorable face. In reality, he used to be a delinquent who was called 'the worst

of the worst' in his hometown, despite being a cowardly weakling when it came to a real fight."

An old photo of White looking like an anachronistic delinquent appeared on the screen. This one was captioned "I misbehaved."

"Wait, why do you have that picture?!" White pitched forward, his eyes popping out of his head.

"The other rangers' secrets are hidden on this mountain," Shimizu said cheerfully.

Toko glanced at Shimizu, smiled, and said, "It's not just the rangers—Producer Shimizu's secret is hidden as well. It's a huge bombshell, so please look for it too."

Shimizu flinched. "Er, well then, would the rangers please go over the rules and warnings?" He grabbed Toko's arm and took her backstage.

"What did you just say?! Why am I involved in this too?!"

"I... I was just following the script." Toko handed him the script, seeming surprised.

Shimizu snatched it out of her hands and his eyes widened upon reading it. "This is different from the original scenario. Who did this?!"

"I don't know. It just became like that at some point." Toko trembled and shrank back.

Okazaki stepped forward to defend her. "Shimizu, we didn't hear anything about the rangers' secrets being revealed. It wasn't part of any of the rehearsals!"

"She's right," said Tamachi. "What secret did you dig up about Kajiwara?" he pressed.

"It's a prank for the sake of entertainment, of course!" Shimizu exclaimed.

"A prank?" The managers looked flustered.

From the looks of things, only Shimizu and Toko had known about the rangers' secrets being revealed. Their scripts were different from the others'.

"But *I'm* not supposed to be involved in this," Shimizu grumbled. "Ugh, what about my script?" He grabbed it and roughly flipped through the pages. Apparently, he hadn't looked at it before.

"Producer Shimizu: Today, all of your inhumane deeds will be exposed to the public. You have given everything to entertainment, and you shall disappear in entertainment."

The words were written in bright red on the page about the rangers' secrets being revealed.

"E-Exposed?! What's the meaning of this?!" He gaped in shock.

Everyone looked around in a confused panic. Kiyotaka, who had

been observing the situation from the wall, slowly spoke up. “It likely means that solving the talisman quiz will lead to your secret, don’t you think?”

“Solving the quiz?” Shimizu’s face paled. He must have had a lot of things to hide. He looked at everyone and pleaded, “I-I’m begging you, can you retrieve my secret before the audience does?! If it’s not something that can be retrieved, make it so that it can’t be seen.”

It was such a sudden turn of events that no one knew how to respond. Kiyotaka simply stood by the wall and watched.

Solving the quiz will expose Shimizu’s inhumane deeds. This isn’t mere harassment by someone who hates him—it’s probably revenge.

Kiyotaka didn’t make any effort to move because he had no interest in helping Shimizu. He would rather enjoy the revenge show that someone had set up.

Akihito, who had just finished explaining the rules and warnings to the audience, came backstage and shouted, “Holmes, I’m begging you too!”

“Akihito...” Kiyotaka blinked. He hadn’t expected Akihito to take Shimizu’s side.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not because I want to help Shimizu-P. Honestly, I don’t give a crap what happens to him.”

“What?” Shimizu turned around.

“A lot of kids came to this event,” Akihito continued. “Most of all, I don’t want to make the audience uncomfortable. I want them to enjoy their whole time here. I want to make the show a success. Isn’t there anything we can do?!”

The managers looked at each other weakly.

“It might be too late, Akihito,” said Tamachi. “People have already run off to look for the talismans.”

“What?” Akihito looked at the stage. Even though Green was still in the middle of talking, the audience had already gotten up and left, too impatient to listen to him.

* * *

Kaori and I got pushed out as everyone was leaving the stage, so we started looking for the talismans too.

Ding dong, ding dong, echoed the sound of a park-wide announcement. “Everyone, the rangers have jumped off the stage to prevent their secrets from being found. They are running around the park, and if you manage to touch one, you’ll be able to shake their hand. Please do so to stop them from taking their secrets.”

The crowd roared and started running with their eyes peeled, more interested in the rangers than the talismans.

“Aoi, I want to shake hands with Yellow, so help me find him!”

Kaori shouted, running off. I followed her, baffled.

While we were chasing the rangers with all our might, people who looked like staff were also running around. I was curious about what they were doing, but catching Yellow took priority. Since he was the new member, he attracted a lot of attention. There was a line of people waiting to shake hands with him, which made it easy to touch him and get in the queue.

“Thanks for the support, but I can’t let you find my secret,” he said with a toothy grin after we got our handshakes. He gave off a cute, mischievous vibe.

Akihito was also being chased by a lot of people, but he was fast enough that they were struggling to keep up.

After some time, there was another announcement. “The exhausted rangers have given up on retrieving the secrets and returned to the stage. Please do your best to find the talismans, everyone. The time limit is one hour from now.”

We switched our focus to looking for the talismans.

“I’m glad I got to shake Yellow’s hand.” Kaori beamed.

We spent the next while running around the park to find the talisman signs.

Talisman 13

38 = yu, 25 = ni, 49 = re, 110 = wa, 510 = ?

Fill in the missing syllable.

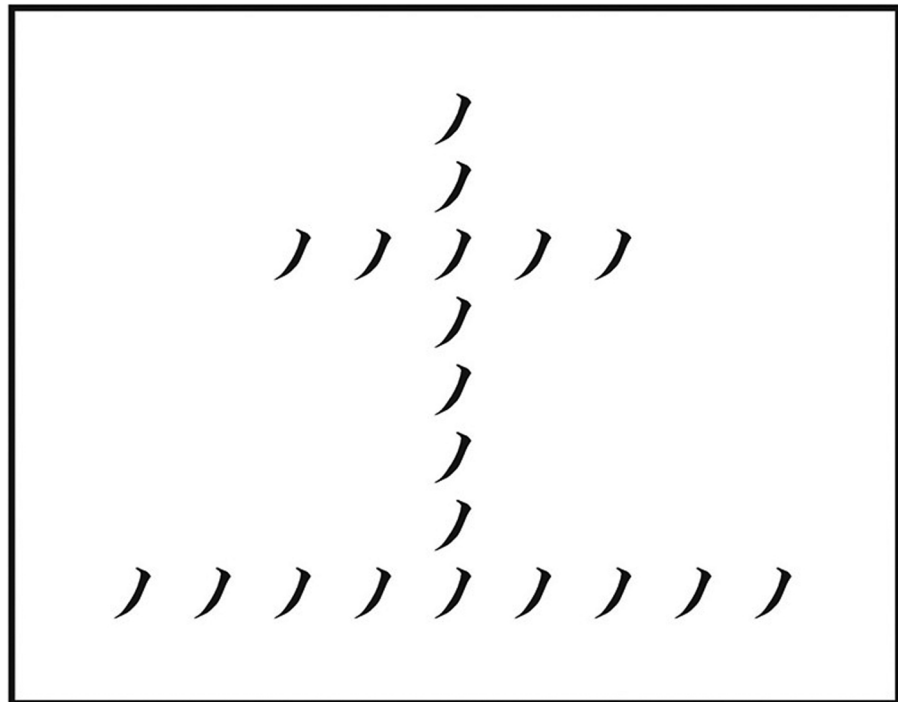
Talisman 16

H H L B B C N O F N N M A S _ S C A K C

Write the missing letter on the answer sheet.

Talisman 11

Decipher the following word: t @ y f @ ¥ 4



Talisman 3



**What
does
this
say?**

The numbers on these talismans were handwritten on colored tape. It was almost as if the original numbers were wrong and had to be corrected on the spot.

Kaori and I looked at the riddles and hummed.

"I know what three is," I said.

"It's the word 'do' made up of the character 'no,' so the answer is 'nodo' as in 'throat,' right? I guess they made some of the questions easy because there are a lot of elementary school kids here."

"But I have no idea what sixteen and eleven are. Do you?"

"Nope. Let's copy them down and move on for now."

"Okay."

Standing there forever wasn't going to help, so we left to look for the next talismans. The problems included riddles and crossword puzzles, but there were also a lot of local questions, probably because of the rangers.

Hirakata Park began as an exhibit of a certain thing. What was it?

What is the name of the sightseeing route that connects Ninna-ji Temple, Ryoanji Temple, and Kinkaku-ji Temple?

Kyoto celebrates the New Year with herring soba noodles. What is the name of the restaurant where it originated?

Which temple is famous for its Omuro cherry blossoms?

Where does the Yatagarasu return to?

The local questions were solvable for us.

"I know these," I said. "Hirakata Park started as an exhibition for figures dressed in chrysanthemum flowers, and the sightseeing route is the Kinukake Road. Where did herring soba originate from?"

"It was a place called Matsuba in Minami-za," Kaori answered.

"Oh, that restaurant. And the Omuro cherry blossoms are at Ninna-ji Temple."

"Lastly, the Yatagarasu returns to Kumano."

We wrote the answers on our leaflets and filled in the empty squares that we could.

"Okay, let's keep going," said Kaori.

"Yeah. Finding talismans and solving riddles is fun, but the stuff about the rangers' secrets was kind of crazy," I said as we jogged through the park.

Kaori frowned. "The producer was laughing, but I didn't think exposing Purple's face was very funny."

I recalled the sight of Purple cowering on the ground and felt bitter. "Yeah..."

"I did laugh at White's ex-delinquent photo, though."

"But I don't really like the idea of exposing people's secrets when they aren't crimes."

“Yeah.”

There was a poster that said “Green’s Secret” in an area called the Palm Walk.

“The quiet Green was actually a hardcore cosplayer. He took the ranger audition out of a love for the genre. His friend signing him up was a lie. He applied by himself.”

It was accompanied by a photo of Green cosplaying as a ranger superhero. The quality of the cosplay was impressive, but thinking about how he surely didn’t want people to know about it made me feel bad again.

Other locations revealed that Blue’s secret was “He wet the bed until elementary school” and Yellow’s secret was “He once nearly got into huge trouble for two-timing.”

Kaori and I smiled awkwardly and shrugged.

“Akihito wet the bed until elementary school. It doesn’t matter to me, but I’m sure he doesn’t want people to know that.”

“Yeah. Yellow’s two-timing is kind of a turn-off, though.”

“He does seem like he’d be popular.”

The word “popular” reminded me of the manager.

“Oh, right, I heard you gave the manager Valentine’s Day chocolate,” I added.

Kaori whirled around to face me. “Oh...yeah, it was on the way.”

“On the way?”

“I went to watch a movie and stopped by to thank him. He came to our club’s event in Demachiyanagi, remember?”

“Yeah, that’s what he said too. He looked really happy.”

“He did?” She blushed slightly.

We were interrupted by my phone ringing. I looked at the caller and was surprised to see that it was Holmes. *He’s calling me while he’s working?*

I picked up. “Um, hello?”

“It’s me, Aoi. Thank you for coming to the HiraPa event today.”

“Oh, you’re welcome.”

He thanked me for coming before confirming I was even here. He must’ve been absolutely sure that I would come. Well, he wasn’t wrong.

“I saw you and Kaori from backstage. Aren’t you tired from standing the whole time?”

So, he actually saw us. His eyes are as good as ever.

“I’m fine, although I’m a bit tired from running around the park. Can I ask you about the questions we couldn’t figure out?”

“Yes, of course.”

I recited the question that said to fill in the missing letter in “H H L B B C N O F N N M A S _ S C A K C.”

“It’s ‘P,’” he answered immediately.

“P...?”

“Those are the chemical elements listed by the first letter of their symbols. H for hydrogen, then He for helium, and so on. The S before the blank is Si—silicon—after which comes P, phosphorus, followed by S, sulfur,” he explained smoothly.

“Oh. What about number thirteen, then? What does 510 equal?”

“That one is ‘n.’”

“N?”

“Yes, ‘n.’ Look at the table of Japanese syllables and number the rows and columns. 510 means row five, column ten, which corresponds to ‘n.’”

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	
wa	ra	ya	ma	ha	na	ta	sa	ka	a	1
	ri		mi	hi	ni	chi	shi	ki	i	2
wo	ru	yu	mu	fu	nu	tsu	su	ku	u	3
	re		me	he	ne	te	se	ke	e	4
n	ro	yo	mo	ho	no	to	so	ko	o	5

“What about question eleven, ‘t @ y f @ ¥ 4’?”

“That’s ‘ganbarou,’ as in ‘let’s do our best.’ Those letters and symbols are what you get if you type it with the keyboard set to romaji input.”

“Ookay then...”

With that, all sixteen squares were filled in.

“I have a favor to ask you, Aoi.”

“What is it?” *Right, there has to be a reason he called me in the middle of the event.*

“Could you take a ride on the Ferris wheel for me?”

“Huh?” I blinked and looked up at the Ferris wheel.

* * *

Forty minutes ago:

“Producer Shimizu: Today, all of your inhumane deeds will be exposed to the public. You have given everything to entertainment, and you shall disappear in entertainment.”

Shimizu panicked at the bright red words written on the script. The staff members, also shaken, were pacing around the room.

Kiyotaka had originally been watching from the wall with no desire to help them, but since Akihito had asked for his aid, he moved to stand in the middle of the group.

“Excuse me, could you show me the talisman questions and answers?” he asked.

“Here are the questions,” a staff member said right away, handing them to him. “The answers are... Where did they go? Hang on a second. Hey, where’d you put the answers?!” he shouted.

“Oh, it’s fine if you can’t find them. Someone may have hidden them.” Kiyotaka took a pen out of his chest pocket and started writing. “You fill the spaces with the first character of each answer, right?” He quickly filled in the answers. “Done. Here’s the final phrase.” He held up the leaflet for everyone to see.

“P kisamanokutsunirakugakikansei”

Since the words weren’t clearly separated from one another, everyone squinted as they tried to decipher the sentence.

“I think it goes without saying that ‘P’ refers to the producer,” Kiyotaka explained. “The rest of the phrase means ‘I finished defacing your shoes.’ There’s a figure of Shimizu in the middle of the park, so I imagine there’s something damning written there, or perhaps some kind of evidence was hidden.”

“Go get it right now!” Shimizu shouted immediately.

“If the perpetrator has gone this far, I think they may have hidden things in other places too.”

“What?!” The producer turned around.

“I have a feeling it’s something that children shouldn’t see, like Akihito said. Let’s just rearrange the order of the answers for now.”

“Rearrange?” Everyone blinked.

“Rangers, please buy us time by running around the park to get the audience’s attention. As for the staff...” Kiyotaka placed a roll of colored tape and a permanent marker on the table. “Please write down what I’m about to say. You’re going to change the numbers on the signs by putting tape over the old numbers and writing the new ones on top. Are you ready? Change one to sixteen, two to one, three to eight, four to twelve, five to three, six to nine, seven to six, eight to seven, nine to ten, ten to two, eleven stays the same, change twelve to four, swap thirteen and fourteen, change fifteen to five, and sixteen to fifteen. As soon as possible. Tamachi and the other rangers’ managers should check the Shimizu figure.”

The managers, staff, and Shimizu himself followed Kiyotaka’s instructions, hurrying around the park to change the numbers on the signs. Meanwhile, the rangers ran around to distract the fans, withdrawing when the changes were complete. Lastly, an announcement was made telling the participants to double-check the talisman numbers due to a mistake on the management’s side.

While this was going on, the rangers’ managers checked the box at the feet of the Shimizu figure in the middle of the park. There was an envelope hidden inside along with graffiti that said “I won’t let a producer get away with coercing sexual favors.”

Kiyotaka looked inside the envelope, grimaced, and slumped his shoulders. “A photo and a note. It’s a good thing we secured this ahead of time.”

“What is it?!” Shimizu quickly closed in on him.

Kiyotaka held up a hand and said, “It’s proof of your crimes.”

His words made the rangers look up.

Shimizu’s eyes widened. “Crimes? It’s probably just a bed picture, right? I’m divorced and single. Is it a crime for me to have a relationship with an actress?!”

“If it’s consensual, I don’t think it’s a problem. The picture in here is a cutout of you that doesn’t show the other party, but there are letters included that claim sexual harassment. It’s evidence that you used your position to have sexual relations with several people in the entertainment industry.”

“Is that enough to be considered evidence?!”

“The picture is only a warning. The person behind this must have the real one. Also, the note says this.” Kiyotaka held up the paper.

“There’s more hidden in other places.”

“Ugh, who did this?” Shimizu facepalmed.

“It must be the work of someone who can’t stand what you’re doing. In fact, I’ve never approved of your ways either.”

“What?” Shimizu frowned. “Aren’t you Akihito’s one-day manager? You’ve never worked with me.”

“I haven’t worked with you, but I have met you before. Do you not remember?” Kiyotaka placed a hand on his chest and tilted his head.

“We’ve met? I did think you looked familiar, but I see attractive guys every day, so...”

“You spent more time with my grandfather than with me.”

“Your grandfather?”

“Yes, his name is Seiji Yagashira. He worked with you on the program *Heirloom Hunt*. You also attended his seventy-seventh birthday, didn’t you?”

“Oh!” The producer’s eyes widened, and he put his hand over his mouth.

“Now that you mention it, he did,” Akihito said with a nod.

“I heard that you once asked my grandfather to say that a forgery was authentic,” Kiyotaka continued. “It sounds like a simple request when I put it that way, but you whispered something that sounded like a threat. ‘If you make an enemy out of me, you’ll never be able to appear on TV again,’ I believe it was. Naturally, there’s no way my grandfather would cave to such a threat. Instead, he gave up on the world of showbiz. Despite that, you came to ask him to appear on the show again. Without properly apologizing, you said, ‘I’ve been thinking of asking you to come back to TV.’ I couldn’t believe it. You really will do anything for the sake of entertainment,” Kiyotaka said with a smile.

Shimizu was rendered speechless while the others’ faces went pale. The only one who said anything was Akihito, who put a hand in front of his mouth and whispered, “There it is, the way he tells people off with a smile. Scary stuff.”

“Even though you never paid attention to ranger shows before, as soon as *Local Rangers* became a popular program, you used your influence to kick out the previous producer and make it your own. On top of that, you’re trying to destroy everything the program established for the sake of short-term profit. Also, I found out through a separate matter that for this event, you rejected a proposal by a freelance broadcast writer only to steal it and have your staff put it together. You didn’t even outsource the quiz questions—you had the staff and managers write them and embezzled the associated costs. It’s no wonder someone has a grudge against you.” Kiyotaka held out his hands and shrugged.

Shimizu’s face stiffened.

“I originally had no intention of stopping this revenge play, but Akihito asked me to. I do agree with him that it isn’t good to make the audience uncomfortable.”

“You scrambled the numbers so that they’d spell out gibberish, right?” Akihito asked.

“That would’ve been suspicious, so I changed it into a different phrase, like this.” Kiyotaka jotted the phrase down on a piece of paper and held it up.

Everyone looked at the sentence in amazement.

“S-So who did this?!” Shimizu shouted, grabbing him by the collar. “You know who it is, don’t you?!”

Kiyotaka shrugged. “I think you should be more concerned about the other evidence hidden in the park. Shouldn’t you go look for it?” he asked with apparent concern in his eyes.

“Dammit!” Shimizu said, running off.

Kiyotaka took out his phone as he watched the producer leave. “I really can’t forgive that man. Not only did he offend my teacher, he’s even guilty of sexual harassment. Now then, I think I’ll ask Aoi for a favor.”

“What is it?” Akihito asked.

“I’m going to have her ride the Ferris wheel. The fact that they kept it operating after closing means there must be something there.”

He made a phone call to Aoi.

* * *

After the call from Holmes, Kaori and I hurried to the Ferris wheel, which was located on even higher ground than the outdoor stage. Since everyone was focused on looking for the talismans, no one else was trying to ride the Ferris wheel. It didn’t seem to require tickets, so we simply bowed to the staff as we got on.

As the gondola rose in the air, we stayed glued to the windows, observing our surroundings. The sun had set, but the sky hadn’t fully darkened yet. The lights in the city and park made for a fantastical scene. We obviously couldn’t see Kyoto Tower at this hour, but it was an amazing view nonetheless.

“Holmes said to tell him if we notice something, right?” Kaori asked.

“Yeah, but I wonder if we’ll see anything.”

“The answer didn’t really make sense, huh?”

“Yeah.”

I looked at the leaflet. The sixteen squares spelled out “kiku no kisetsu ni sakura ga mankai P.” *“The cherry blossoms are in full bloom during chrysanthemum season?”* And what does the “P” mean? Is it a message from the producer?

“HiraPa started with figures dressed in chrysanthemum flowers and it’s almost cherry blossom season. Is that it?” Kaori wondered.

“It could be.”

We kept our eyes wide open as we talked. Suddenly, we both shouted “Oh!” at the same time. There was a large piece of paper on the roof of the ticket office with a big number “5” on it.

“That’s it!” I quickly took a picture with my phone and sent it to Holmes.

* * *

“But man, you really are a genius, Holmes,” Akihito said sincerely, holding the paper that Kiyotaka had held up.

“kisama no kutsu ni rakugaki kansei (I finished defacing your shoes)”

↓

“kiku no kisetsu ni sakura ga mankai (the cherry blossoms are in full bloom during chrysanthemum season)”

“I wouldn’t say that,” replied Kiyotaka. “I didn’t come up with the anagram myself.”

“But you rearranged the numbers really fast, didn’t you?”

“It’s not that impressi—”

Just then, a message from Aoi arrived.

“Thank you, Aoi.” Kiyotaka smiled as he replied to her and turned to look at the staff. “Sorry, could you go investigate attraction number five, ‘Legend of Luxor,’ and number five of all of the coin lockers in the park?”

“Right away!”

The staff members ran out. The only ones left backstage were the rangers and their managers. Purple was still sitting against the wall after having her makeup-less face exposed. No one had been able to say anything to her. Her manager, Okazaki, was watching the stage from the wings.

Kiyotaka walked up to her and said gently, “Are you all right?”

Purple flinched and raised her face slightly. “Yes. I was just a little shocked,” she said with a weak smile.

“I see that your manager has been neglecting you this whole time even though you were in such a state.”

Purple hurriedly looked up and said, “That’s not true. I told her to leave me alone, so she’s just being considerate...”

“Even so, she hasn’t shown any sign of concern for you.”

“What are you implying?” She frowned in suspicion.

“I apologize for my rudeness.” Kiyotaka bowed before continuing, “You’re the mastermind behind this, aren’t you?”

Her face tensed, and Okazaki turned around in surprise.

“Wh-Why do you say that?”

“Right before Shimizu showed your picture on stage, you shouted ‘Nooo.’ Now, based on what he said, you would’ve been able to predict that your bare face would be shown, but if you were truly unaware of the plan, you would’ve been hopeful enough to wait to see the picture first. However, you shouted before seeing it. You knew in advance that your bare face was going to be exposed. In other words, that was a planned reaction. Your manager, Okazaki, was also aware of the plan, which is why she didn’t comfort you or show any sign of concern. She knew you weren’t actually depressed. Unlike real actors, laymen can’t act out a situation with that level of detail.” Kiyotaka chuckled.

Okazaki looked away, ashamed.

“When Shimizu saw your bare face, he stopped moving,” Kiyotaka continued. “Perhaps he thought he recognized you.”

Purple bit her lip in silence.

“You supposedly made your debut with this ranger role, but even to the untrained eye, you seem very accustomed to the stage and your acting is excellent. I also heard that you’re a big sister type with a lot of friends in the entertainment industry. Is it possible that you were part of the industry before?”

She smiled self-deprecatingly and said, “My acting isn’t anything special. I mean, you could tell that my reaction on stage was an act, couldn’t you?”

“No. If you had shouted a few seconds later, I might have not noticed. Did Shimizu do something terrible to you in the past, which led to you leaving the industry for some time before coming back? The other person in the photo isn’t visible, but it’s you, isn’t it?”

Purple gave a defeated shrug. “Yes, you’re right. I joined a talent agency after high school because I admired the entertainment industry, but after Shimizu’s sexual harassment, I couldn’t get any roles. He said, ‘Are you stupid? Sleeping with people is just part of the business. It’s what gets you auditions. People like you who aren’t especially pretty and have no personality have no choice but to use their bodies.’ I got sick of the entertainment industry. Before I quit, I secretly took a picture so that I could get my revenge, but in the end, I was too scared to go through with it. I went back to my hometown a total failure and went to a beauty school. I learned how to style hair and do makeup, and when I found out that cosmetics and eyelid glue can completely transform a girl’s appearance, I thought, ‘If I’d known I could be this beautiful, I might’ve made it further in the entertainment industry.’ In the end, I hadn’t fully given up. Then, when the ranger audition was held in Chubu, I immediately went for it.”

She heaved a sigh. “My new agency was wonderful, and so was my manager, Okazaki. It made me think the entertainment industry

wasn't a bad place after all; it was just that man who was horrible. The rangers got more popular and I was really happy. But then *he* came along..." She clenched her fists. "I planned this revenge scheme because Toko came crying to me. That man took Toko—a *teenager*—to his apartment and said, 'If you say no, I'm taking you off the show.' Apparently, he let her go after she threw up from the stress, but I just couldn't let him get away with it anymore. So I looked for his victims, and it turned out there were a ton of them among my friends in the industry. I swore revenge. I was going to expose his crimes and bring him to justice."

"But there are many elements of this revenge play that would've been impossible to accomplish by yourself," said Kiyotaka. "You asked Toko to help and convinced Okazaki to join you." He turned to her manager. "Okazaki, you wrote these questions, didn't you?"

Okazaki nodded and gently held Purple's shoulders. "Yes, the girls told me everything, and I agreed to help them out of anger towards Shimizu. I did feel hesitant about it, though."

"Which is why you used an anagram. You were observing him, weren't you? If he showed signs of improvement, you'd use the phrase about cherry blossoms. But he didn't change, so you went ahead with the plan. Did he perhaps do something to you too?"

"He only invited me for drinks, but I thought about how a young girl in a weaker position wouldn't be able to refuse. Besides, I had a grudge against the man myself."

"You're in a relationship with the previous producer, aren't you?"

Okazaki looked up, startled. "How do you know that?"

"By watching the way you looked when you talked about him. It was only a hunch, though."

"You really are 'Holmes,' huh?" she said with a shrug.

"I know you wanted to expose Shimizu at this event, but Akihito didn't want that, so I had to put a stop to the plan. I'm his manager, after all, and I understand how he feels. For the sake of the people who love the rangers, please exact your revenge after the event is over. There are a lot of girls who look up to you, you know?"

Kiyotaka handed the envelope to Purple, who accepted it with shaky hands, nodded, and said, "Okay..."

After the event, Purple filed a complaint against Producer Shimizu. His crimes and wrongdoings were brought to light one after another and became a major news topic. Local Rangers got its old producer back and became even more popular—but that was a little later on.

Kaori and I returned to the outdoor stage right before the time limit. Many people were already putting their answer sheets in the ballot boxes.

"I feel bad for Yellow, who shook my hand, but I'm voting for Akihito," Kaori said, putting her vote in the blue box.

"I thought about it for a while, and I think I'll go with Purple. I want her to hang in there. Sorry, Akihito," I said, putting my sheet in the purple box.

The first thirty people got their hugs from the rangers as well as commemorative merchandise. They looked very pleased.

Purple placed first in the popularity contest. It seemed that everyone had sympathized with her after the shock of having her bare face exposed. Akihito placed second, Yellow placed third, and Green and White tied for fourth.

Purple stood in the middle of the stage, smiling brightly. "Thank you so much, everyone. As you've now seen, my real face is very plain. But I hope that seeing my transformation will let you dream a little. Girls can become as beautiful as they want with makeup. Oh, the boys might've found it horrifying, though," she said cheerfully, eliciting a roar of laughter from the audience. "That said, I love myself both with and without makeup. Every girl can become Cinderella, so please have confidence in yourself. Although in my case, I became a ranger, not Cinderella. Thank you again!" She struck a ranger pose and everyone laughed as they clapped.

Next, Akihito stepped forward and said, "Yeah, I wet the bed until elementary school, but I became a ranger too."

Everyone laughed again.

"I grew up in Kyoto and my parents were from Kanto and Kyushu. I know some people don't like that I'm the Kanto ranger, and sometimes I feel bad that I can't do anything about my mixed heritage. But personally, I don't think Tokyo works that way to begin with. It's the capital city where people from all over the country gather. I don't expect that reasoning to satisfy the unhappy people, but I think it's valid for me to be the Kanto ranger, and I hope there are viewers who feel the same way. See you in season two!"

Akihito raised both hands and was met with loud cheers from the audience. Kaori and I nodded and clapped as hard as we could.

And so, the Local Rangers event at Hirakata Park came to an end. It had been nothing but fun for me, so I was genuinely surprised when Holmes later told me about what was going on behind the scenes...

By the time the event ended, Producer Shimizu was gone.

“He ran away, huh?” Akihito said with a disappointed shrug. He had finished changing clothes and was preparing to leave.

“It seems so,” replied Kiyotaka. “It doesn’t mean he’s escaped his crimes, but it must’ve been too awkward for him to stay here. By the way, Akihito...”

“Yeah?” The actor turned around.

“You’ve seemed troubled as of late. Did you know this was going to happen?”

Akihito gave a strained smile and scratched his head. “Pretty much. I didn’t know about Purple’s revenge plan, but when the previous producer was kicked off the show, the atmosphere went from fun to uncomfortable. I figured the event at HiraPa was gonna be the key. Like, if it didn’t succeed, everything was gonna fall apart.”

“I see. Is that why you asked me to help?”

“Yeah, I knew if something unexpected happened, you’d be able to handle it one way or another.”

“Huh?” Tamachi, who had been listening to their conversation, immediately jumped in. “That’s what it was? What about the haters?”

“Haters?” Akihito gave him a blank look.

“I thought you were depressed because of your haters.”

“What? When you’re famous, you have haters. It’s normal, like how when you make money, you have to pay taxes. When it’s summer, there are mosquitoes. What’s the point of worrying about it?” Akihito shrugged.

Kiyotaka burst out laughing. “That’s what I thought. It seemed unusual for you to be concerned about something like that.”

“Well, to be honest, I don’t like it when people say bad things about me. But it doesn’t bother me *that* much. Just like you, I don’t care what people think of me. I’m still me either way. Besides, everyone gets criticized at some point in their life, right? It’s rare to have people openly cheering for you, but I’m lucky enough to have that. I’m seriously grateful, to the point where the criticism doesn’t bother me.”

Kiyotaka smiled and nodded. “You’re completely right. You might be a man of better character than I thought.”

“You said something like that before.” Akihito grinned mischievously.

The other rangers, who had been listening to the conversation, nodded with tears in their eyes, as if Akihito’s words had moved their hearts.

“Well then, let’s go eat, guys!” Akihito shouted, turning around. “My treat!”

Everyone’s faces lit up.

“Hey, Holmes, what’s a place with good drinks?” Akihito asked.

“If that’s what you’re looking for, I recommend the sake bar in Fushimi that I worked at.”

“That sounds great!” Purple exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “I love sake. I can’t wait to drink in Fushimi. Can Toko come too?”

“Of course,” said Akihito.

“Can I really?” Toko asked timidly. “Do they have non-alcoholic drinks?”

“Yes, they do,” Kiyotaka answered with a smile.

“How about we invite Aoi and Kaori too, then?” Akihito suggested.

“Huh?” Kiyotaka’s eyes lit up. “Can we?”

“Yeah, they helped us, after all.”

“Thank you,” Kiyotaka said, taking out his phone and shooting off a quick message. He looked up with a satisfied smile. “Aoi said they can come. I also made a reservation at the bar. It’s all ours starting an hour from now.”

“You really get things done fast,” Akihito said with a laugh.

“Shall we go, then?”

“Yeah.”

Everyone left the outdoor stage and casually walked towards the entry gate. The Ferris wheel on top of the hill was still lit up, sparkling as if it were sending the rangers off.

Epilogue

The door chime rang, and I turned around to say, “Welcome.”

It was cherry blossom season, so the streets of Kyoto were bustling with activity. Even the quiet Kura had been getting more visitors. Today, a sightseeing woman had bought a cup and saucer set. “I passed by this store the last time I was in Kyoto, and I’ve been curious ever since. I’m glad I worked up the courage to come in,” she’d said with a smile. People found it difficult to enter this store—I was the same way at first.

The next person to come in was a well-built man wearing a kimono and a hat. The moment I saw him, I smiled and said, “Oh, hello, Ensho.”

“Afternoon, Aoi. I heard Holmes is back in Kyoto?”

“Yes, he was working as a temporary lecturer at a local university. He’s done now.”

“Well that was fast.”

“It was a short-term position, and besides, it’s spring break now.”

After being told to go to at least ten places for training, Holmes had gone to Shokado Garden Art Museum, Ueda’s company, New York, a sake brewery in Fushimi, a cram school in Tokyo, and Kyoto Seika University. He had also worked as Akihito’s manager on a couple of occasions, and now he was doing short-term jobs.

“Were you looking for Holmes?” I asked. “He comes in on weekends sometimes.”

“Nah, I was just in the neighborhood and thought I’d report something to you. ’Scuse me,” he said, sitting down at the counter.

“To me?” I pointed at myself, confused.

“Yeah.” He nodded. “I got Yanagihara to look at the tea bowl I brought in last time. He said it’s definitely Yu Fujiwara.”

“I see. That’s good.” I clapped my hands together in front of my face.

I had faith that it was real, but it’s still a relief to hear that.

“You’re really something, eh?” He rested his chin on his hand and sighed.

“No, that’s not true.” I shrugged.

He looked at me and smirked in amusement.

“Why are you smiling?” I asked.

“You really are like dried squid.”

“Again with that?” I slumped my shoulders, annoyed.

“Yeah, you’re dried squid. The more you chew it, the more the flavor comes out. It’s a good thing, ain’t it?”

I started preparing the coffee, still unsure if his “compliment” was something to be happy about.

“Which means you also have something that calms people’s spite,” he muttered to himself, quietly enough that I couldn’t hear it clearly while making coffee.

“What’s it like training under Yanagihara?” I asked as I set down the coffee cups.

Ensho made a bitter expression.

“Is it hard?” I continued.

“It’s more like running around doing pointless errands. It’d be nice if it were more substantial.”

Holmes had also been running errands for the owner all his life. By going to many places and encountering genuine articles, he had trained his eye for authenticity and made himself known in the antique industry. As far as training went, it might not have seemed exciting. But it was through the accumulation of experiences that he’d gotten to where he was now.

However, Ensho, who had already been over thirty when he became an apprentice, might’ve been feeling frustrated and impatient. I, too, sometimes felt impatient because Holmes was so far ahead of me, so I understood how he felt. His case seemed slightly different, though. It was something more fundamental.

“Do you really like appraising and working with antiques?” I asked.

He looked up, seeming surprised. “Well, I don’t hate it.”

That was probably his genuine opinion. He “didn’t hate” antiques. He had entered this world because Holmes had set him off. He had thought, “Maybe I can do it too,” and perhaps he had hoped he could become as obsessed with it as Holmes was. But maybe he hadn’t been as drawn in as much as he’d expected. As he said, working with antique arts was only at the “I don’t hate it” level.

“Is there anything else you like?”

“Doing what you like ain’t enough to put food on the table.” He gave me a fed-up look.

“I know I’m still a student, but I think work is something that can be difficult to get through whether you like it or not. In that case, it’s a lot better to suffer doing something you love.”

I wasn’t a full-time working adult yet, but I did know that even though studying for school was painful, studying antiques was incredibly fun, to the point where I lost track of time while doing it. I never considered time spent on something I loved to be time wasted.

Holmes had been so busy before he'd left for training, but his face had always been relaxed. That was because it was all work that he loved doing. Now, even though he was enjoying his training and making himself useful, it felt like wasted time to him because it wasn't what he truly loved. He wanted to return to the work he loved as soon as possible.

Ensho did seem impatient to catch up to Holmes, but beneath that, he was impatient to work on something he loved, and that feeling had developed into uncertainty.

I just hope creating forgeries isn't the work he loves...

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that when I don't know anything," I said.

I thought he'd be irritated and lash out at me, but he simply smiled slightly and didn't say anything about it.

"Oh, right, Yanagihara's having another authenticity exhibition during Golden Week," he said after a while as if trying to change the subject. "If you're interested, I'll give you an invitation."

I hurriedly shook my head. "It sounds like fun, but I'm going on a trip during Golden Week."

His eyes widened. "With Holmes?"

My face instantly felt hot. My cheeks had surely turned bright red.

Ensho hummed and crossed his arms. "Where are you going?"

"I left the decision to Holmes," I said with a shrug.

I thought back to our discussion about the trip.

* * *

When Holmes was a temporary lecturer at the university, he came back to work at Kura on the weekends. I was really happy to be able to work with him again, and I was excited that he also resumed his lessons on antiques. However...

"Holmes, aren't you working too much?" I asked, worried.

He shook his head. "No, I've been taking it easy. Besides, working here doesn't tire me out," he said, opening the accounting book—no, the magazine in front of him.

"What are you reading?" I peered at it, feather duster in hand.

With a dazzling smile, he said, "It's a travel magazine. Where do you want to go for your birthday? Personally, I'd like to see the beautiful Aegean Sea and those white-walled buildings with you."

"Aegean—" I blurted out, surprised by the unexpected suggestion.

"Yes, the deep blue sea and pure white buildings. The sunsets there are truly amazing; no painting can capture that beauty. Oh, but Florence is lovely too. The whole city is a work of art."

"Florence..."

"Oh, but we *must* see the Pietà statue in Vatican City. We can't

leave that out. I want to just go everywhere with you, but Golden Week is so short.” He looked down at the magazine, sighed, and rested his chin on his hand.

“Um, I don’t have that much money...”

“What? Don’t worry about that. All you need to bring is clothes and your passport. You don’t even need to bring your wallet.”

“What?” I squeaked.

“I plan to spend all of the money I’ve saved from my training on this trip,” he said happily, placing a hand on his chest.

My face stiffened. “No, I’ll bring my wallet. Um, wouldn’t it be a waste of money to spend everything you earned on this?”

“Aoi, money is meant to be spent on the experiences you consider the best. That way, the economy moves, your heart is enriched, and with your newly gained energy, you work and earn money again. It’s a good chain reaction.”

“That’s extreme logic, huh?”

“Oh, but first, I’ll have to visit your parents and ask for permission to take you on a trip. We’ll need to prepare your passport too,” he muttered to himself.

“Um...”

“Yes?” He looked up at me.

“I already told my parents I was thinking of going on a trip with you during Golden Week and that you wanted to visit to talk about that.” It was embarrassing, but I’d gone ahead and told them, thinking it’d come as less of a shock that way. I’d been prepared to slowly persuade them if they had objected. “And then they said, ‘We know you two are dating, and you’re a grown woman, so you don’t need our permission. If you want to go, then go.’ They also said, ‘We won’t know how to react if he asks for permission. It’ll be awkward, so please tell him not to do that.’”

Holmes placed a hand on his chest, seeming slightly relieved. He must’ve sensed that my parents weren’t testing him; they genuinely didn’t want him to come and make things awkward.

“To be honest, that’s a weight off my shoulders,” he replied. “Even I would feel ashamed saying ‘Please let me go on a trip with your daughter’ with a seemingly innocent smile while harboring ulterior motives in my heart that can never be erased.”

“Um...could you refrain from saying those things out loud if possible?” I didn’t know what kind of face to make.

“Sorry, I just can’t lie to you.”

That’s Holmes for you.

“In that case, regarding your passport...” he continued.

I held up my hand to stop him. “They gave us a condition, though.”

“A condition?” His eyes widened.

“Yes. They said we have to stay in Japan, for safety’s sake.”

I could understand why my mom felt that way. Other countries probably didn’t feel that foreign to Holmes, but to my family, they seemed endlessly far away. She must’ve been worried about us going abroad for our first-ever trip.

“I...see...” he murmured softly before slumping onto the counter.

“Holmes?”

“Sorry, it was too much of a shock. I want to cry.”

“Wh-What?! Did you want to go abroad that much?”

“I did, but more importantly, I’d been running several simulations in my head so that I could provide a wonderful travel plan no matter which country you chose. It’s distressing to be sent back to a blank slate,” he said weakly, still slumped on the counter.

“Sorry...”

“It’s fine. Your parents are right. I wasn’t considerate enough. I’m just a little sad because I was excited to toast with you in a room overlooking the Aegean Sea.”

“Holmes...”

I felt kind of bad. He must have prepared a lot of amazing travel itineraries.

But the next moment, he abruptly got up and said, “All right, I’m over it. I’m happy just to be allowed to go on a trip with you.” He placed a hand on his chest and grinned.

“That’s not very convincing when you were *that* disappointed, you know?”

“No, I really am happy just to be able to travel with you. Now then, is there anywhere in particular you’d like to go?” He closed the magazine and smiled gently.

“Hmm...” I thought about it and crossed my arms. “I can’t think of anything, so can I let you decide?”

“Huh?” His eyes widened. “Are you not looking forward to this trip, Aoi? Could it be that I’m the only one who’s excited?” he asked, panicking slightly.

I shook my head. “I’m really looking forward to it.”

It was going to be my first trip with Holmes. At first it didn’t feel real, but as Golden Week drew closer, I found myself getting more excited about it. It was embarrassing, though, and to be honest, I felt afraid of the unknown. I was turning twenty, and it was probably time for us to move forward a little in our relationship. My heart was preparing itself for that.

I was also working on losing weight in my own way. I ate in moderation, had stopped snacking between meals, did sit-ups, and walked to places whenever possible. It was a slow and steady

approach, though, so I'd only lost about a kilogram.

But if I say, "I'm losing weight because I'm excited for the trip," it'll make me seem overly enthusiastic, which is embarrassing, so I won't...

"I feel like I'll have fun no matter where we go," I clarified.

"I see. I enjoy planning as much as I enjoy the traveling itself."

"That sounds like you. I'm the kind of person who doesn't mind traveling without a plan and just playing it by ear. Like, even a hotel in Kyoto or Nara would be fine with me."

Thinking about it, hiking in Kurama and going to Kinomoto had both been really fun. I didn't mind at all that they were close by.

"I adore Kyoto and Nara too, but we can go there anytime. It doesn't have to be during this trip," he said with a disapproving pout. I couldn't help but laugh.

Holmes is really looking forward to this trip, and it's something special to him.

"I'm happy just to go anywhere with you, Holmes. I know I'll have fun no matter where we go, so I'll leave all of the planning to you."

I really couldn't wait to go. *Can't Golden Week come sooner?*

He then held his head in his hands.

"Holmes?!"

"This is bad," he said, reverting to his Kyoto accent.

"Huh? Sorry, would it be better if I thought about where to go?"

"No, your cuteness just pierced through my heart. I'm going to die of cuteness overload. I'm on my last breath."

"Wh-What?!" I felt my cheeks grow hot.

While I was still flustered, Holmes looked up, smiled, and said, "Well then, I'll take care of the planning. I'm selfish and like doing things my way, so I'm glad you're leaving it to me."

I'd gotten used to his self-deprecating way of saying things, to the point where it seemed funny now.

"I really am looking forward to it, Aoi," he said, touching my cheek.

His feverish gaze was stifling. I couldn't say anything, but when I looked straight back at him, he weakly averted his eyes and gently removed his hand from my cheek. It didn't seem like it was out of embarrassment or shyness, which confused me.

"In that case, can I keep our destination a secret until the last minute?" he asked with a mischievous smile, holding his index finger in front of his mouth.

"Yes, I'll look forward to it," I said with a bow, slightly relieved that he was back to his usual self.

* * *

And so, I still didn't know where we were going.

“He’s finally going to sink his fangs into you, eh?” Ensho said in a serious tone, resting his chin on his hand.

I suppressed my embarrassment and frowned. “Could you not phrase it like that?”

“I know it’s none of my business, but if you wanna stay on close terms with him, you shouldn’t go. If you’re dead set on going, you’d better be prepared.”

I didn’t sense any joking in his words whatsoever.

“Huh?” I replied.

“Well then,” he said at the same time, standing up.

“Um, what did you mean by that?”

By the time I asked, he was already leaving the store.

“Prepared for what?”

As the door chime echoed through the store, I tilted my head and put away the coffee cups. It was a month before my twentieth birthday. Perhaps Ensho’s words were hinting at what was to come.

It was supposed to be a fun and sweet trip, but Holmes and I would find ourselves coming across a certain person again and getting caught up in something strange. That, however, is a story for next time.

Afterword

Thank you for continuing to read this series. This is the ninth volume, and since there was a volume 6.5, it's the tenth book.

The previous volume focused on Kiyotaka's training, so I couldn't cover Aoi's nineteenth birthday. I received a lot of questions asking if they were able to celebrate it properly, so this time I included a flashback. Also, since the series has gotten so long, it became difficult to fit each character's individual drama into the usual episodic format. After deliberating, I decided to separate some of the scenes into very brief stories like last time. I hope you enjoyed the small conversation between Kiyotaka and Ensho, and the continuation of Kaori's love life.

I wanted to use Hirakata Park as the setting this time, and when I asked Keihan Holdings for permission, they readily agreed and even accompanied me when I was collecting information. Thanks to that, I was able to get a behind-the-scenes look at the outdoor venue, solidifying my image of what it was like backstage.

Hirakata Park was a wonderful theme park full of soothing nostalgia, warmth, excitement, and playfulness. Thank you very much.

As usual, please allow me to use this space to express my thanks:

To Futabasha, EVERYSTAR, the proofreaders, the distributors, the bookstores, the cover designer, the illustrator Shizu Yamauchi, who drew yet another wonderful cover and frontispieces, and you for picking up this book.

I'm truly thankful for all of the connections surrounding me and this series.

Thank you all so much.

Mai Mochizuki

Translator's Corner

Thank you for reading volume 9 of *Holmes of Kyoto*! This time, there were several Japanese terms that couldn't be gracefully explained in-text.

First, chapter 1 has Aoi helping out at an event for Setsubun, a festival unique to Japan. Setsubun is held in early February and represents the day before the start of spring according to the lunar calendar. Common rituals for this festival are throwing roasted soybeans to drive away evil spirits, eating the number of soybeans corresponding to your age, and eating eho-maki (uncut sushi rolls) while facing the lucky direction of the year.

On Holmes's side of chapter 1, there's a scene where Kota explains the order that sake should be drunk in:

"It's generally said that it's best to start with light flavors and gradually raise the intensity. You should start with daiginjo or sparkling sake, then move on to ginjo or honjozo. After that comes junmai ginjo, junmai, and yamahai or kimoto. Aged sake comes last."

Types of premium sake are distinguished by the rice polishing ratio (how much of the grain remains after a percentage of the surface has been polished away) and the presence of added distilled alcohol.

Daiginjo: 50% or less; has distilled alcohol

Ginjo: 60% or less; has distilled alcohol

Honjozo: 70% or less; has distilled alcohol

Junmai ginjo: 60% or less; no additional alcohol

Junmai: no specified ratio; no additional alcohol

Yamahai and kimoto aren't grades, but rather methods of creating sake. Most sake is made by introducing a small amount of industrially produced pure lactic acid to the yeast starter to clean the fermenting environment, but yamahai and kimoto instead use the existing lactic bacteria in the air, resulting in wilder taste and texture. The kimoto method has existed for hundreds of years and involves a lot of labor, with brewery staff having to use poles to mash the rice into a paste. Yamahai is a simplified version of kimoto that makes use of moisture and temperature variations to skip the hard labor.



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by Mai Mochizuki

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